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Volume 73, Number 43 | February 25 - March 2, 2004

Reader Service

## Basketball City is becoming a political football

By Albert Amateau

Tension is rising in the tug of war between Basketball City and park advocates over Pier 63 on the Hudson River as the sports facility's lease draws closer to its Dec. 31, 2004, expiration.

Basketball City has been asking its friends and patrons to lobby the Hudson River Park Trust to extend the lease until the Trust is ready to convert the pier at 23rd St. into part of the 5-mile-long park under construction between Chambers and 59th Sts.

One ploy was a letter by Howard Mills, Republican assemblymember from Orange County and deputy minority leader of the Assembly, to his fellow legislators to join him in his "effort to save Basketball City from demolition by the Hudson River Trust Corporation."

Mills' Dec. 17 letter cited Basketball City's provision of extensive free court use to thousands of public school students. Mills also pointed out that since September, the Police Department's Mounted Division, horses and officers, has been on the ground floor of the pier beneath the rooftop basketball and volleyball courts.

But Mills' fellow elected officials representing West Side neighborhoods along the Hudson River resented the intrusion into a hot issue in their district.

Assemblymembers Deborah Glick, Richard Gottfried and Scott Stringer fired off letters two weeks later urging legislators to disregard Mills' efforts to save Basketball City. "Our constituents desperately need and want open park space," they said in their Jan. 5 letter to legislators. State Senator Tom Duane followed with a letter politely telling Mills that his "suggestions were off the mark." He told Mills that however beneficial Basketball City and the police Mounted Division may be, there is no compelling reason for them to be in a waterfront park.

Mills, however, is apparently too busy now to be concerned with Basketball City



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since he was chosen last week by state Republican Party leaders to be the G.O.P. challenger this year to U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer, a Herculean task, according to Republicans and Democrats alike.

In any case, legislators appear to have ignored Mills' plea to help Basketball City, "partly, at least, because we responded so promptly and told our colleagues that it's an issue the concerns our constituents," said Gottfried.

Chris Martin, spokesperson for the Trust, said the agency hasn't received any letters from legislators about Basketball City.

Bruce Radler, president of Basketball City and a resident of Long Island, said last week that he didn't know Mills. "Maybe one of my partners does," he suggested. Radler, who has been a principal in Basketball City for six years, declares that he wants the facility to stay on Pier 63. "At a hearing last month, they [the Trust] said they don't have the money to build this north end of the park," he said. "We'd like to stay until they do and when they're ready to build we hope they'll find another place for us in the park because we provide so many opportunities for kids and schools," he added.

The Trust and Basketball City have been in court for the past year and a half over lease issues. Basketball City sued the Trust in June 2002 seeking to force the Trust to grant them a two-year lease extension. That issue was resolved in September when the Trust agreed to the extension; but the Trust then sought to compel Basketball City to agree to leave at the end of this year.

"We can't comment on pending litigation," said Martin.

But some waterfront advocates wonder just how aggressively the Trust, a state and city agency, will enforce the lease deadline at the end of this year. "They really don't have money to develop the pier now and Basketball City pays them about \$276,000 a year in rent," said one source who wished to remain anonymous. Moreover, the Mounted Division became a Basketball City subtenant at the suggestion of the Bloomberg administration when the unit's stables on W. 42nd St. between 11th and 12th Aves. were ready for redevelopment.

Meanwhile, Radler, who has operated a Basketball City in Boston for the past two years, has been trying to convince the city to allow him to build a Basketball City on Pier 36 on the East River.

Community Board 3 supports a Basketball City on Pier 36, said Harvey Epstein chairperson of the board that covers the Lower East Side. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver also supports Basketball City's bid for Pier 36.

"We're asking the lease to be 10 years and no longer than 15 years," said Epstein. Radler says he needs a 30-year lease to finance the project. The city Economic Development Corp. governs the development of the pier, Epstein noted. "They told us that if there are any new conditions regarding Pier 36 they

would let us know and they said they would begin the decision process in April,” Epstein said.

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*The Villager* is published by  
Community Media LLC.  
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