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Villager photo by Lincoln Anderson

Basketball players from schools without courts rallied outside the Hudson River Park Trust's board of directors meeting, pleading that Basketball City not be evicted from Pier 63.

Doctoroff puts full-court press on Basketball City

By Lincoln Anderson

Like Shaquille O'Neal in the paint, it's so far been impossible to dislodge Basketball City from Pier 63 in the Hudson River Park. But on May 30, turning up the pressure, Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff wrote to Bruce Radler, Basketball City's president, urging him to accept the Hudson River Park Trust's offer under which the basketball facility would be able to stay on the W. 23rd St. pier through Sept. 1 of this year, but would have to vacate after that date.

"We appreciate all that Basketball City has done to provide an amenity to its customers, including corporations and youth groups," Doctoroff wrote. "But... the Trust's mission is to complete the park itself so that it may serve as a free

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public amenity for all New Yorkers.”

Under the Hudson River Park Act, Pier 63 is supposed to be a noncommercial, open pier for public use.

A for-profit business, Basketball City is under a bubble and on top of a building on the pier that houses the Police Department’s Mounted Unit. Radler has questioned why he has gotten an eviction notice but the Mounted Unit hasn’t.

Doctoroff, in his letter, explained that the plan is for the Mounted Unit to remain on the pier temporarily after Basketball City vacates; the city has identified a relocation site for the Mounted Unit and anticipates completion of the new stables by the end of the year. (The new location for the Mounted Unit is reportedly Pier 76.) However, Doctoroff wrote, even with the horse police still in place on Pier 63, the Trust can do “substantial demolition and site preparation work” shortly after Basketball City’s departure.

“The Trust’s engineers assure us that this work can proceed at no risk to N.Y.P.D. personnel or animals,” Doctoroff wrote.

Under the Trust’s plan, Basketball City would still be able to have its camp session this summer. Basketball City’s vacating the pier by Sept. 1 would shave two months’ time off the demolition work at the pier. But if Basketball City doesn’t vacate by Sept. 1 and stays through the end of the year, it would result in a delay of more than a year in constructing the permanent park on Pier 63, plus an added \$1 million in construction costs, Doctoroff noted.

The Trust initiated eviction proceedings against Basketball City in June of last year. Last month, the State Court of Appeals denied Basketball City’s last-ditch appeal of the case the Trust had won in a suit to compel Basketball City to leave the pier. Last month, the Friends of Hudson River Park also threatened to initiate legal action against Basketball City and the Mounted Unit if they don’t vacate the Chelsea pier promptly.

“We are eager to stop wasting scarce resources on legal battles, and instead focus funding and energy on completing the park,” Doctoroff wrote in his May 30 letter. He added that the city will continue its efforts to help Basketball City secure a new location on Pier 36 on the Lower East Side waterfront.

At the end of last Friday, Radler issued his response to Doctoroff, saying he’ll vacate — if he can move Basketball City to Pier 40, which is also in the Hudson River Park, at W. Houston St.

In an interview, Radler said it will take at least 18 months before a new Basketball City would be ready to open at Pier 36. The Basketball City on the West Side is heavily used by local public school basketball teams. Meanwhile, he’s made commitments to Lower East Side community groups for court time at the Pier 36 Basketball City. In short, there won’t be enough room at Pier 36 for the public school teams currently using Pier 63, he said.

“If we open on the East Side, then what happens to all these programs here?” he asked. “The kids will be thrown out in the street?”

Chris Martin, the Hudson River Park Trust’s spokesperson, said Basketball City’s initial investment in a new facility at Pier 40 would exceed \$1 million, which, under the Hudson River Park Act, would require the Trust to issue an open request for proposals to interested bidders. Martin said Basketball City has stated they don’t want to respond to an R.F.P.

Radler counters that his lawyers have looked at the Trust Act and interpret it differently, feeling what Basketball City plans to do at Pier 40 wouldn’t require an R.F.P. At another point, Radler said he had no problem responding to a competitive R.F.P. for Pier 40.

As for Radler’s saying the public school basketball teams he provides with court time at the W. 23rd St. Basketball City will be “thrown into the street” if Basketball City is evicted, Martin said Radler has had lots of time to make a contingency plan.

“If that was the case and they wanted to stay on the West Side, then they should have looked for a place on the West Side,” Martin said. “They knew it in the lease, they knew it when they were notified, they knew it in the park’s master plan. New York State legislation requires us to develop the pier as open parkland.”

Martin said the Trust was formulating a formal response to Radler’s latest response.

Members of public school basketball teams that play at Basketball City came to the Trust’s board of directors meeting last Thursday, but were told they couldn’t come inside. So they rallied outside on the sidewalk.

“All these schools that are here today don’t have a gym,” said Ndabaningi Simmons, the junior varsity coach at Beacon High School on the Upper West Side. If Basketball City closed, he said, “We’d be homeless. We’d have to scramble, use the YMCA.” However, the YMCA doesn’t always have court time available when the teams need it, he said. “Most of these kids are from impoverished areas. This is like their after-school activity,” he added.

Sixteen schools — all in Manhattan south of 61st St. — use Basketball City for practices and games. Under the Net Gain program, Urban Dove provides some of the funding for the program, as do the corporations that play at Basketball City. Radler also requires the players to do community service, such as cleaning parks and helping plant trees.

Many of these schools have no home court, while others have courts that are not regulation.

“We have a gym, but it was built in 1904. It wasn’t built for basketball; there are

pillars along the baseline,” said Aaron Hoffman, varsity basketball coach at High School for Health Professions, the former Stuyvesant High School, at 15th St. and First Ave. “If it wasn’t for Basketball City, we wouldn’t have a gym.”

A member of the Manhattan Village Academy girls team, Unique Henderson, 16, the Silver Hawks’ center and leading scorer, said they love playing at Basketball City.

“I think it’s really messed up that they’re taking Basketball City away from us, because we don’t have a gym,” she said. “I think they should just leave it the way it is. It’s a safe, comfortable place, so that people aren’t out on the street.”

Added her coach, Ryan Bittman, “Our school’s in Chelsea, but most of our kids are from West Harlem, East Harlem and the Lower East Side. Basketball City gives them a safe place.”

Dan Alterman, the attorney representing Friends of Hudson River Park, said the Friends haven’t filed suit against either Basketball City or the police yet.

“They were supposed to have gotten off as of the end of 2004,” Alterman said. “We’re expecting them to get out. Now Basketball City is trying to fight this through the press after fighting it in the courts for several years. Obviously, the kids are a compelling thing. But a lot has been done to make sure that next year that is free park space for New Yorkers. It’s really a hold-up. They’ve gotten every benefit of the doubt. And what’s fair is fair.”

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