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Testimony at City Council hearing, re: West Side stadium proposal - June 2003

Before the: Committee on Economic Development

New York City Council

June 3, 2004

How Will The Proposed West Side Stadium Complex Impact Our City?

Statement on Behalf of Manhattan Community Board No.4

by

Walter Mankoff, Chair

Good afternoon Chairman Sanders and Committee members. My name is Walter Mankoff. I am the Chair of Manhattan Community Board No. 4. We welcome this opportunity to speak about the City's ill-advised plan to put a stadium on the West Side of Manhattan. Given the methodical attempt by the City and State to use the State ownership or control of the areas west of 11th Avenue to evade public and legislative review of this project, this will be one the few opportunities for the public to be heard on this vital matter. Our District extends from 14th Street to 60th Streets and from either Eighth Avenue or Sixth Avenue to the Hudson River. We encompass the well-established residential and business communities of Clinton/Hell's Kitchen and Chelsea. The site for the proposed Olympic and football stadium lies at our district's heart, but its impact will be felt far beyond our boundaries.

Community Board 4 has consistently opposed stadiums on the West Side, ever since they were first proposed many years ago. But the latest version, a 75,000 seat football stadium pretending to do double duty as a convention center, disturbs us the most.

Our carefully considered position was arrived at after two years of study and discussion with those who live and work in our area. Unlike NIMBY positions which enjoy little support away from the focal point of a project, an ever growing list of highly respected organizations and experts share our views and are making their position public.

Press opponents of a West Side stadium include the New York Times (editorial 1/26/04), Newsday (editorial, 2/12/04), New York Observer (editorial 3/4/04) and various columnists and op-ed articles. Significantly, many of the strongest opponents are sportswriters

The stadium is opposed by many local elected officials including Council member Quinn, Assembly member Gottfried, State Senator Thomas Duane and Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum and Congressman Gerald Nadler.

Negative opinions have been forthcoming from fiscal analysts at the Independent Budget Office, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Center for an Urban Future, the University of Pennsylvania and countless other planning and development experts. Lastly, the NY Times reported that the Regional Plan Association staff had prepared a blistering critique of the heavily subsidized stadium, which the group's study paper suggested would "deter rather than attract the large-scale redevelopment" that the West Side needs and that the RPA had agreed to delay the release of the report following intense lobbying by Deputy Mayor Doctoroff (New York Times, 5/6/04).

Before proceeding, let me summarize the reasons for our opposition. A West Side Stadium will:

"Cause severe environmental and traffic impacts endangering crucial NYC industries such as theaters and restaurants.

" Cost outrageous sums requiring use of City funds as backing for securities. May impair funding essential for education, schools, health care, affordable housing and crucial infrastructure repairs.

" Discourage badly needed residential and commercial development in vicinity of stadium.

" Force unacceptably high levels of building density and height in other parts of the neighborhood to make up for lack of real development on the stadium site.

" Force potential development away from lower Manhattan, other parts of the borough or from other boroughs to provide sufficient development in the West Side to provide income needed to back up bonds. May probably delay Second Avenue subway.

Community Board 4 does not oppose the City's bid for the Olympics, and we support an expansion of the Javits Convention Center. We are opposed only to the proposed Olympic "legacy" to the West Side - a permanent football stadium. We believe that the long-term benefits of the stadium to our community are illusory, and that even if those benefits are realized, the stadium will do more harm than good.

Our City needs more housing, an expanded Javits Convention Center to draw business and create jobs, and balanced commercial development. The West Side rail yards, four entire city blocks on the Hudson River, is a development opportunity that can play a crucial role in achieving these goals. It should not be squandered on a football stadium.

Ask yourselves: what does a football stadium do for us? But before you do that, ask yourselves whether you'll even have the chance to weigh in on that question. Because the site is

owned by the MTA, and the proposed stadium would apparently be part of the Javits expansion, which is also a state project, the western rail yards have been carved out of the zoning plan being developed by the Department of City Planning. If that strategy prevails, and we certainly hope it doesn't, neither the stadium nor its financing will be subject to public review through the City's land use review procedure, and today's hearing could be the last the City Council hears about the development of this vast and valuable property.

But this need not be. The stadium plan is unworkable without the major rezoning of the 59 square block area of Hudson Yards. Only rezoning can provide the open plaza and the mid-block boulevard that are signature parts of this plan, and only rezoning can provide the rushed funding and construction of the No. 7 line extension we are told we need immediately. And here, the City Council cannot be deprived of its rightful role. We urge the Council to use its zoning power to demand proper public and legislative review of the entire project including the stadium and Javits Center expansion.

But let's assume that you do have the opportunity to evaluate the stadium. We believe that a football stadium is bad planning, and bad development risk management for the City's plans for growth. A stadium is bad planning because it will only aggravate the area's crushing traffic problems. The Broadway theaters seat 240,000 people a week, the Madison Square Garden Arena seats 20,000 for concert events. At times it feels like they're all trying to find parking in our neighborhood - parking that will disappear when the parking lots are taken for new development. And the City wants to add 75,000 football fans? And the huge crowds for other stadium events?

And while traffic will be awful when the stadium is in use, the surrounding streets will be active only when the stadium is in use and dead when it's not. Even the Department of City Planning has recognized this as a concern, and has talked of measures to enliven the building's perimeter. But how much can really be done? The latest proposed adornments to the stadium site range from a flea market to a sports bar. These are supposedly to attract Class A office buildings and upscale apartments to the vicinity. Using this huge, valuable site to build one stadium is bad development risk management because it puts an awful lot of eggs in a single basket.

Remember, the proposed stadium is only one part of the City's proposal for the development of the Hell's Kitchen/Hudson Yards area. That proposal calls for substantial new residential and commercial communities that will fuel the City's competitiveness in the regional and global economies for 40 years to come. So much bulk, in fact, that the plan may never be achieved. Without the stadium, that bulk could be spread across the rail yards in a much more rational manner, and development could occur in more realistic sizes and a more realistic time frame.

A stadium will be obsolete in 20 to 30 years. What happens then to the City's 40-year plan? The public is being asked to invest in a deck over the rail yards, an extension of the No. 7 subway line, and attractive but very expensive public space. Yet we will be relying, to a very large extent, on a single user - the New York Jets - to determine the ultimate success or failure of that investment. And, improper as it may seem, The City is relying entirely on

cost/benefit studies arranged for and paid for by the Jets. And we may be compromising the City's ability to complete other important projects, such as the Second Avenue subway, the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan, and commercial development plans in other parts of the City.

Many examples are offered of other cities that have built stadiums next to residential areas (Seattle) or stadiums as part of convention centers (St. Louis). But none of those other cities come close to New York for complexity - they're surrounded by freeways, and distant from commercial and population densities like ours.

The Jets have offered the St Louis domed stadium adjoining the Convention Center as a model of what can be done in New York. From a cost standpoint alone there is no comparison. The Ernst and Young study done for the Jets in March 2004 indicates a 1995 cost for the domed stadium in St. Louis at \$260 million. In 2004 dollars the cost would be about \$330 million. The Jets stadium has a basic cost of \$1.4 billion or about 4.5 times the inflation-adjusted St. Louis cost. And the New York cost does not include any payment to the MTA for use of its land, a factor that might easily bring the New York cost to well in excess of \$2 billion.

Relying on enormous projects by single developers has not worked well in our city. Take the example of the Times Square Redevelopment. The original plan, way back in the '80s, was that a single developer would develop all the buildings. A collapsing real estate market and a series of lawsuits meant that nothing happened for 10 years. Eventually, the development risk was spread among a variety of developers, serving a variety of constituencies, and rebuilding occurred.

The City, NYC 2012 and the Jets can paint a dazzling picture of what this stadium could look like. But dazzle doesn't get projects built in this City.

We should learn from the experience, and model, of Battery Park City, where the public invested in an infrastructure that allowed a variety of developments to occur - developments that, over time - a long time - created a successful residential and commercial community, and a revenue stream that will continue to flow long after the infrastructure is paid for.

There is a range of opinions in our community about the level of growth that is planned for our community in the next 40 years. Some may take to the streets - and maybe even the courts - to oppose all forms of development. Many will accept that change is inevitable, but will try to shape that change to take the community's needs into account. But there is consistent and widespread opposition in the community to a stadium. As for Community Board 4, we support rational, balanced development that will inure to the betterment of our area and the City as a whole.

Let me finish by asking you to reflect on what a stadium prevents us from doing. A stadium will block a precious waterfront site with what is the equivalent of a solid three-square block building 30 stories high. There are so many other things we can do with this

site that will have lasting benefits for our community and all New Yorkers long after the Olympics Games are a distant memory. Time constraints mean that today's hearing is not conducive to meaningful public dialogue on this subject. Yet before we commit this valuable area to such a narrow and costly use as a stadium, there must be a full public discussion of its merit. I thank your committee for its role in beginning that process.