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Residents, city clash over school redevelopment plan

Highlandtown site the object of controversy

Baltimore Business Journal - by [Daniel J. Sernovitz](#) Staff

Baltimore City's housing department is under pressure to seek new proposals for the redevelopment of the former **Highlandtown Middle School** near Patterson Park, triggered by questions from residents and developers about the way the city has reached out to potential development teams.

The city's Department of Housing and Community Development has shifted key dates in the process, limited public input, and placed restrictions on the redevelopment of the site at 101 S. Ellwood Ave., according to the housing department and people familiar with the project. Those changes and conditions appear to have made the project too costly to undertake, according to developers and interested residents.

The project could significantly impact the Patterson Park and Highlandtown neighborhoods, Highlandtown Community Association President Don Arnold said, and residents are concerned the city has not sought enough feedback from them. Parking problems, among other things, could worsen for the neighbors closest to the Ellwood Street site, depending on how the property is developed.

"I haven't found too many folks in the community who are not concerned, especially folks who live near ground zero," Arnold said.

City Councilman James B. Kraft, who represents the area, said he believes too many questions have come up about the city's actions, creating confusion both for hopeful developers and residents. He said he thinks the department needs to scrap its current proposal, rewrite the terms of its notice to developers and start the process over again.

"Housing messed up," Kraft said.

While there have been some changes since the notice was first sent out, housing department spokeswoman Cheron Porter said the department has no plans to reissue its request for proposals.



Christopher Myers | Contributor

The city wants to redevelop the former Highlandtown Middle School.

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"As previously stated, we believe extending the proposal deadline has allowed more time for developers to put together quality proposals," Porter said in an e-mail. "To reiterate, the process has not been compromised."

The housing department offered the 74-year-old property to developers May 19, with proposals due just a month later, on June 30. Several neighborhood residents, as well as Kraft, said developers need more time to respond, so the date was been pushed back to Aug. 29.

Porter said she expects the extension to help attract more development proposals. Sixteen developers attended a June 6 conference.

Development teams were "discouraged from directly contacting the community during the selection process," according to the city's request for proposals. As a result, the department cancelled a community meeting scheduled for July 14 to avoid interaction between residents and the developers.

Kraft decided to host the meeting anyway to let residents ask questions and voice their opinions. The session was attended by several potential developers.

Joe Di Mattina, a member of the Patterson Park Neighborhood Association, said the property could be a strong addition to the neighborhood if it's redeveloped with the right mix of residential, retail and commercial uses. But he said he does not feel the housing department has taken enough time to listen to residents' concerns about and ideas for the project.

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