

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON PLANNING, DISPOSITIONS AND
CONCESSIONS

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September 3, 2014
Start: 1:19 p.m.
Recess: 1:37 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - Committee Rm,
16th Fl.

B E F O R E: INEZ E. DICKENS
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:
Andrew Cohen
Mark Treyger
Ydanis A. Rodriguez
Darlene Mealy

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Baaba Halm
Assistant Commissioner
Governmental Relations
Housing, Preservation and Development

Veanda Simmons
Deputy Director
Manhattan Planning
Housing, Preservation and Development

Pauline Turley
Board of Directors
Irish Arts Center

Aidan Connolly
Executive Director
Irish Arts Center

Joe Restuccia
Executive Director
Clinton Housing Development Company

Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair
Land Use and Zoning Committee
Community Board 4

[background comments]

[gavel]

[background comments]

CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Good afternoon. I am Council Member Inez E. Dickens; as Chair of the Subcommittee on Planning, Dispositions and Concessions I would like to welcome everyone to today's hearing. I want to thank and acknowledge my Sergeant of Arms, Angel Chacon, and my Land Use Director, Raj Yuman [sp?], Deputy Director Amy Levitan and of course, my phenomenal attorney, Ann McCoy. [background comments] Yay for the attorneys. [laughter, background comments] Members of the Planning Committee who are here are [background comment] Council Members Cohen, who gets the gold star today [background comments] and Council Member Treyger, who says that we're now going to have silver [laughter, background comments, applause] and Council Member Rodriguez is on his way in; waive your hand. [background comments, cheers, laughter, applause] No, he doesn't get a cover [sic]; he hasn't sat down yet [laughter].

We have one item on our calendar today that we will be hearing and voting on; Land Use Item

2 No. 0112, a UDAAP Application by HPD concerning the
3 Irish Arts Center located in Council Member Corey
4 Johnson's district at 51st Street and 11th Avenue.

5 I just wanna remind everyone that the
6 next hearing will be September the 16th, by the way.

7 We will now proceed to that item that we
8 are holding a public hearing on today. I'm going to
9 ask the applicant, Assistant Commissioner Baaba Halm
10 of HPD, please come up and Veanda Simmons, Deputy
11 Director for Manhattan HPD. Please take a seat, turn
12 on your mics, speak into the mic and identify
13 yourselves first.

14 BAABA HALM: Good afternoon Chair
15 Dickens; I am Baaba Halm, Assistant Commissioner for
16 Governmental Relations at HPD.

17 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Pull the mic
18 closer.

19 VEANDA SIMMONS: Good afternoon Chair
20 Dickens and Council Members. My name is Veanda
21 Simmons and I'm the Deputy Director of Manhattan
22 Planning at HPD.

23 BAABA HALM: Land Use Item 111 [sic]
24 consists of a designation of an Urban Development
25 Action Area Project and a disposition of City-owned

1 property located at 726 through 728 111th [sic]
2 Avenue and 553 and 555 West 51st Street and it also
3 known as the Irish Arts Center and the Juan Alonzo
4 Garden Extension. The project area consists of
5 underutilized property that will be disposed of in
6 two portions.
7

8 Under the first proposed project the
9 sponsor proposes to construct a new building at 726
10 11th Avenue on Disposition Area 1 that will contain
11 approximately 35,900 square feet of community
12 facility space. The new building will serve as the
13 home for the Irish Arts Center. Currently the Irish
14 Arts Center operates in 553 West 51st Street. The
15 development will be an L-shaped building that is five
16 stories on 11th Avenue and three stories on West 51st
17 Street. The new facility will provide a 199-seat
18 theatre, a rehearsal studios, classrooms and
19 administrative spaces.

20 The second proposed project will convey a
21 1,255-square-foot portion of Lot 103, which adjacent
22 to an existing garden that will be used for the
23 purpose of extending the garden, the Juan Alonzo
24 Community Garden. The garden is now owned by Clinton
25 Housing Development Company and the proposed upgrades

2 will extend the publicly accessible open space and a
3 secondary entrance to the Irish Arts Center will be
4 provided through the garden extension.

5 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Do you have
6 anything you wanna add?

7 VEANDA SIMMONS: Just that this a highly
8 supported project; the CPC Commission voted for this
9 unanimously in agreement, so we're excited about this
10 project as well.

11 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: One correction I
12 would like to make, Commissioner, and it's Land Use
13 Item No. 112. [background comment] It's our fault
14 that you were given the wrong.. [interpose]

15 BAABA HALM: Okay.

16 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: land use item
17 number.

18 BAABA HALM: Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Alright. So now
20 you said this is a 199-seat theatre; is there any..
21 does the Irish Arts Center have anything there now
22 and if so, what do they... do they have a theatre there
23 now located anywhere in that area?

24

25

2 BAABA HALM: Yes and they're coming up on
3 the second panel and they can tell you about their
4 existing current use... [crosstalk]

5 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: What they have now?

6 BAABA HALM: Yes.

7 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: And how long will
8 this development take?

9 BAABA HALM: The project is expected to
10 be completed by 2016.

11 VEANDA SIMMONS: The hope is that the
12 project will be aligned with the celebration in 2016
13 with the Irish government and the Irish Arts Center
14 will speak in more detail about that, but that was
15 the goal; there's a huge commitment from the Irish
16 government; we also have an architect who is on loan
17 from the Irish government, so 2016 is the anticipated
18 completion date.

19 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Now I believe I
20 heard you say that there's a part that will become
21 part of the garden that is right now part of the
22 Clinton Housing Development; did I understand that
23 correct?

24 BAABA HALM: No, right now it's a lot
25 that is adjacent to the existing garden and we're

2 giving them a small portion of the lot which is
3 vacant, so it's a parking area [sic] [crosstalk]

4 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: So Clinton Housing
5 will lose just a small part of their vacant lot that
6 they own that will be contributed to the Irish Art...
7 [crosstalk]

8 BAABA HALM: The one...

9 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: I'm sorry.

10 BAABA HALM: Well no, it's the... this
11 proposal consists of two separate projects, so one is
12 the expansion of the Irish Arts Center and now... the
13 second piece is that the existing community garden is
14 gonna be given some more space to further extend out;
15 that existing community garden is owned by the
16 Clinton Housing Development Corporation.

17 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Alright.
18 Understood now. Are there any questions from my
19 colleagues?

20 COUNCIL MEMBER TREYGER: One... one quick
21 question... [interpose]

22 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Council Member...

23 COUNCIL MEMBER TREYGER: This is
24 fantastic proposal here; I think there's a lot of
25 great support for the culture; just one quick

2 question about location. Was this an area that
3 flooded during Superstorm Sandy; do you know; was
4 there any type of... so there's no... no issues of
5 resiliency...

6 BAABA HALM: No, 'cause this is West 51st
7 Street, so that... that...

8 COUNCIL MEMBER TREYGER: It was farther
9 away from the water.

10 BAABA HALM: Farther... yes.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER TREYGER: Excellent.

12 Thank you. That's all, Chair.

13 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Council Member
14 Treyger does an awful lot around Superstorm Sandy, so
15 he's looking always to get any support. [laughter]
16 Alright, thank you so much.

17 BAABA HALM: Thank you.

18 [background comments]

19 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Alright, we have a...
20 were' now gonna have the public to come forth in
21 favor, a panel of four, Joe Restuccio... Restuccia...
22 [background comments] alright, Clinton Housing
23 Development, Jean-Daniel Noland, Manhattan Community
24 Board 4, Pauline Turley, Irish Arts Center, Aidan
25 Connolly, also of the Irish Arts Center. Please,

2 whichever one of you wants to start first... how 'bout
3 the... what about the Irish Arts Center starting and
4 you will have a three-minute allowance; I adhere to
5 it strongly because there's four of you to give
6 testimony, so I'm gonna ask you to please be
7 cognizant of those that are sitting on the panel and
8 for those of us [background comment] that are sitting
9 here waiting to hear from you [background comment]
10 and when you do start, please pull the mic close to
11 you, turn it on, speak distinctly, giving your name
12 and your affiliation. Thank you.

13 PAULINE TURLEY: Thank you Council Member
14 Dickens. My name is Pauline Turley; I'm on the Board
15 of Directors of the Irish Arts Center; I've been
16 involved with the center since 1997, including nine
17 years as the former Executive Director.

18 The Irish Arts Center was founded in 1972
19 to promote Irish culture to New Yorkers and Americans
20 of all backgrounds, which remains a vital part of our
21 mission today. Though our programs have always
22 reached well beyond our Hell's Kitchen neighborhood,
23 we've been based there in a three-story tenement
24 since 1974. For the past 40 years we've been
25 presenting Irish music, theatre, film, literature and

2 dance and over 40 classes each week in Irish
3 language, history, music and dance.

4 One of the remarkable attributes of New
5 York City is of course its wonderful diversity and
6 the access all New Yorkers have to top quality
7 cultural institutions. If you walk down Park Avenue
8 you pass Asian Society, Scandinavian Center, Alliance
9 Francaise; if you're Jewish or African American or
10 Latino there are wonderful museums and performing art
11 centers that you can take your children and
12 grandchildren to in order for them to learn about
13 their history and their story of immigration to
14 America. Given the contributions of the Irish and
15 the Irish American community, not only to New York
16 but across the country, it is surprising that we
17 don't have a cultural home to tell the success
18 stories of the Irish in America. We're excited to be
19 helping change that with our plans to build a new
20 Irish Arts Center that would be fully accessible and
21 would allow us to better fulfill our mission to
22 explore the links between Irish culture and other
23 ethnicities and to share those links with New Yorkers
24 of all ages and backgrounds. We're also excited to
25 be part of the ever-developing Clinton-Hell's Kitchen

2 neighborhood which we've been part of for the past
3 four decades and are very grateful for the
4 consideration of the New York City Council for this
5 project.

6 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Thank you so much.
7 And I just wanna add that the accent I detect is
8 enjoyable to listen to [laughter] and since I've been
9 to Ireland and have a distinct appreciation for the
10 Irish culture, I thank you. Next please.

11 AIDAN CONNOLLY: Madame Chair and Council
12 Members and staff, thank you. At the new Irish Arts...
13 I'm Aidan Connolly; I'm the Executive Director of
14 Irish Arts Center since 2007. The new Irish Arts
15 Center is more than simply building a stronger, more
16 sustainable facility for our organization, though it
17 is certainly about that; it's also about reimagining
18 what any Irish art center or indeed any ethnically-
19 rooted cultural facility can be in the 21st century,
20 harnessing the great diversity and dynamism and high
21 standards of the world's most dynamic cultural
22 melting pot. It's about more sustainable and
23 suitable and accessible classrooms for the range of
24 community education programs we offer and it's about
25 expanding the number of seats in our theatre from 99

1 to 199 seats to increase our impact and earn revenue
2 potential. But it's also about providing a platform
3 of innovation and collaboration that is dynamic and
4 inclusive; a place for Irish artists to work with
5 their New York counterparts of all backgrounds on
6 projects that expand the notion of what it is to be
7 Irish and American and indeed a global cultural
8 citizen in the 21st century in New York City. It's a
9 place for projects like Cambria/Douglas, a recent
10 success where we paired the Irish writer and actor
11 Donal O'Kelly with the African American writer-actor
12 Roger Guenveur Smith for a joint production about
13 Frederick Douglass' historic trip to Ireland where he
14 found common cause with Ireland's great Liberator,
15 Daniel O'Connell. I will never forget standing in
16 the back of the theatre, our existing theatre, at a
17 post-show talk-back where a young woman, half African
18 American; half Irish American, thanked the artists
19 for inviting her to celebrate her Irish heritage for
20 the very first time; much more than bricks and
21 mortar, that is the Irish Arts Center we are seeking
22 to built. This project is a great collaboration of
23 the government of Ireland and the City of New York;
24 we are so grateful for our Council Member Corey
25

1 Johnson and indeed all of the City Council Members
2 who have supported this project and we're grateful
3 for your consideration today. Thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Thank you.

5 JOE RESTUCCIA: My name is Joe Restuccia;
6 I'm the Executive Director of Clinton Housing
7 Development Company. The Irish Arts Center is
8 located on the Clinton Urban Renewal Area, which was
9 started in 1969. Clinton Housing has been in
10 existence since 1973; I have worked with the Urban
11 Renewal Area since 1982 to make sure that the Urban
12 Renewal Area was not only just affordable housing,
13 but embodied all the long-term tenants, including the
14 cultural tenants who are here. Most important for us
15 as a neighborhood in this is we've been able to
16 reconcile a bunch of important things. The existing
17 Irish Arts Center has been in place since 1972, but
18 also on the proposed location on 11th Avenue has been
19 Cybert Tire in business at that location since 1916
20 continuously. Clinton Housing is relocating them to
21 another building around the corner on West 53rd
22 Street as part of this project; the Irish Arts Center
23 is able to then use their building to expand; we have
24 developed affordable housing on both sides of the
25

2 Irish Arts Center about 10 years ago and included a
3 community garden, the Juan Alonzo Community Garden;
4 as part of this project we'll expand the Juan Alonzo
5 Community Garden. So for us, working in a
6 neighborhood with a group like this has pulled
7 together both the old and the new, existing Cybert
8 Tire building is.. the façade is being preserved and
9 restored, the existing Irish Arts Center is being
10 preserved and restored with new buildings being built
11 through and around it. So for us, this is a way that
12 we can express that we have a community that is about
13 change and about embracing new things and more
14 affordable housing, but at the same time making sure
15 it's a continuity of that which was there before, so
16 we're very happy to support the Irish Arts Center and
17 the expansion of the Juan Alonzo Garden.

18 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Thank you so much
19 and I wanna add that we've been joined by Council
20 Member Darlene Mealy.

21 JEAN-DANIEL NOLAND: Chair Dickens;
22 members of the Committee, good afternoon; my name is
23 Jean-Daniel Noland; I'm the former Chair of Manhattan
24 Community Board 4 and I'm presently the Chair of its
25 Land Use and Zoning Committee and I mentioned that I

2 was former chair because we have been trying to get
3 the Irish Arts Center, this process through for
4 nearly a decade; it's a wonderful endeavor, so thank
5 you for this opportunity.

6 Chair Dickens, I don't have to tell you;
7 as you probably know, during the dark ages in Europe
8 the Irish monks kept alive the classical learning of
9 Greece and Rome and they kept it alive because they
10 had learned to read and copy the gospels and they
11 didn't stop, they began to read and copy all the old
12 Greek and Latin pagan literature that came their way
13 and what they knew, the bible, the literature of
14 Greece and Rome, we know because they passed these
15 things onto us, first by copying all these
16 manuscripts; then by disseminating ancient text which
17 otherwise would have been lost and they saved the
18 transmission of European culture and that's how the
19 Irish saved civilization. And if you approve this
20 disposition, the Irish will save the West Side.

21 Now the West Side, as you know, was once
22 the home of artists and actors and writers and New
23 York once welcomed artists and actors and writers and
24 we must do so again if the civilization of New York
25 is to be saved. So the Irish Arts Center has come

1 before the community and Manhattan Community Board 4
2 since the fall of Rome or nearly a decade [laughter]
3 to discuss this expansion and it has listened to our
4 concerns, as Mr. Restuccia has mentioned; we want to
5 ensure that the neighbors have their privacy and is
6 not gonna be disturbed, we wanna preserve Cybert
7 Tire, has been there since 1916 and we wanted to
8 design a building that fit into the context of the
9 adjacent 19th century buildings, which are based on
10 Greek and Roman architecture, humanistic architecture
11 and this design has done so and four, we wanted to
12 create an expanded arts center which will integrate
13 into the community and welcome artists and musicians
14 and writers and provide a vital new center of arts
15 and learning for all New Yorkers.

17 Chair Dickens, wherever they went, those
18 monks, they brought their love of learning and art
19 and breathed new life; we feel the new Irish Arts
20 Center will do the same for New York. Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Thank you for your
22 testimony, to all of you and although all of you have
23 provided valuable information and testimony
24 concerning this Irish Arts Center, the eclectic way
25 that the former chair of Community Board 4 has

2 delivered his testimony is truly enjoyable.

3 [laughter]

4 I have no questions other than that I
5 appreciate anything that expands arts and encourages
6 the education for all populations to be able to have
7 not only an understanding but an appreciation. When
8 I was in Ireland I went to... was in Northern Ireland
9 and I found, and I hope that you will be inclusive of
10 this, that they had a complete exhibit and an
11 understanding and appreciation and had in fact taken
12 a part of the civil rights fight that the blacks had
13 here in America and in the world and incorporated it
14 to their culture and their lifestyle and so I hope
15 that this Irish Arts Center would include that as a
16 significant part of Irish history.

17 Do any of my colleagues have any
18 questions? [background comment] Of course, it
19 doesn't... now this is not a Sandy question is it...?
20 [crosstalk]

21 COUNCIL MEMBER TREYGER: No it's not.
22 [laughter] I'm actually gonna put my other hat on; I
23 was a former public school high school history
24 teacher and just to say for the record, you cannot
25 discuss New York City history without discussing the

2 great contributions by American Irish New Yorkers and
3 this long overdue and we welcome and embrace you with
4 open arms. Congratulations.

5 AIDAN CONNOLLY: Thank you, Council
6 Member.

7 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Council Member
8 Mealy.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER MEALY: Just sayin'
10 congratulations.

11 AIDAN CONNOLLY: Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Seeing no other
13 questions from my colleagues and I have no other
14 questions, I wanna add that this project is highly
15 supported by the Council Member whose district this
16 is, Corey Johnson, who would've been here to give
17 testimony himself in support, but he has been delayed
18 at a meeting concerning his district. Now that I've
19 covered Corey, I will [background comment] call on
20 the counsel to call the roll; I am asking... I'm voting
21 aye and I'm asking my colleagues to also vote aye.
22 [background comment] I'm closing the public hearing
23 and asking for a vote.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Chair Dickens.

25 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: Aye.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Council Member Mealy.

3 COUNCIL MEMBER MEALY: Aye.

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Council Member

5 Rodriguez.

6

7 COUNCIL MEMBER RODRIGUEZ: Aye.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Council Member Cohen.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER COHEN: Aye.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Council Member

11 Treyger.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER TREYGER: Aye.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: By a vote of 5 in the
14 affirmative, 0 abstentions and no negatives, Land Use
15 Item 0112, the Irish Arts Center is approved and
16 referred to the full Land Use Committee.

17 CHAIRPERSON DICKENS: I wanna thank the
18 members of the public, my colleagues, my counsel;
19 Land Use staff for attending today's hearings. This
20 hearing is hereby adjourned.

21 [gavel]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date September 6, 2014