

Who's Going To Win This Prize And Where Is the Public Input?

BY LINCOLN ANDERSON

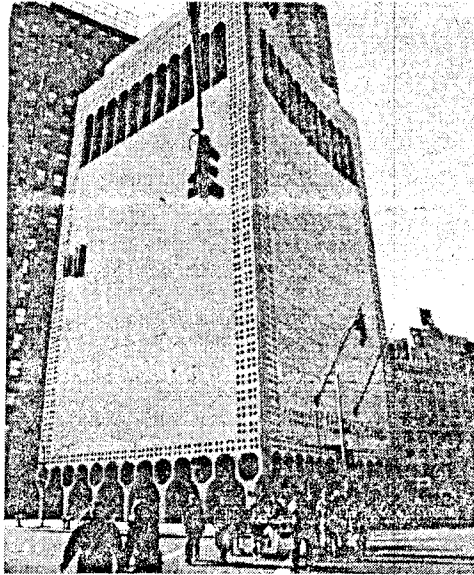
With rumors indicating a developer for 2 Columbus Circle will be picked sometime this month, elected officials have charged that a public review of the sale of the city-owned property was neglected, something they are calling highly unusual.

Councilmember Ronnie Eldridge and Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger claim that when 2 Columbus Circle was transferred from the Viacom Foundation to the city Economic Development Corp. (EDC) in November, there should have been a public review.

In fact, the transfer did not follow the normal protocol, in which the property first goes to the city before going to the EDC, which issues requests for proposals. The property's transfer to the city, which did not happen, should have triggered a public review.

Called 'Back-Door Move'

"We believe the city did this to bypass certain land reviews," said Judy McClain, an aide to one of the officials, calling the transfer "a back-door move," that "sets a precedent for this type of transfer."



Public review is sought for 2 Columbus Circle.

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"What we're calling on the Mayor Giuliani to do is request that EDC take this through the public review process," said Messinger spokesperson Lisa Daglian, who criticized the mayor for his record of "struggling against community input."

Officials and development watchdog groups have already criticized the city and EDC for being secretive regarding the proposals and selection process for 2 Columbus Circle. All that is known is that 11 developers submitted proposals, most of them for reuse of the existing building.

The only known bidders are Donald Trump, who would demolish the building, and the Dahesh art museum and the New Thought Institute of New York, a new age religious group, both of which would reuse the building.

Formerly home to the Huntington Hartford Art Museum, the building now houses the city's convention and visitors center. Until November, it was still technically owned by the Gulf & Western Foundation, which later became the Viacom Foundation after a corporate merger.

When the city sells a property, a Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) is supposed to be triggered, during which affected community boards and the Planning Department would review the proposal. A borough board review is also supposed to occur, the borough

board being composed of all Manhattan community board members, the Manhattan City Council delegation and the borough president. The borough board can even vote to kill the project, or to set development guidelines, such as whether or not to limit the development to reuse of the current structure or how tall the building can be. The city's guidelines for 2 Columbus Circle would allow the current 10-story building to be razed and a 20- to 30-story tower to be built.

Silence From City Hall

Upper West Side elected officials and Messinger have written to EDC chair Charles Millard and twice to Deputy Mayor Fran Reiter regarding the issue without response.

"In this situation, as I understand it, a ULURP is not required for a number of legal reasons," said EDC spokesperson Bernadette O'Leary. Yet, O'Leary said, meetings are now being set up to allow the community to have input, similar to "a process like ULURP would provide."

A spokesperson for the mayor's press office did not return calls by press time.

Eldridge aide Mary Barber stressed it is important to open up the public review process to insure that 2 Columbus Circle's development be considered in the context of the overall development of Columbus Circle, where the Coliseum is also set to be developed. A developer for that property is due to be picked in the spring. ☞