

Next step for Stamford-BLT license agreement unclear

Mayoral candidates: Say decision leaves city with fresh slate

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STAMFORD -- In the wake of developer Build and Land Technology's move Tuesday evening to withdraw its application for a license agreement to build a new headquarters for hedge fund Bridgewater, the city's mayoral candidates and others said the developer's decision created a fresh slate from which to proceed.

They also said the situation presented a delicate challenge for the city's next chief elected official: to craft a deal that can reconcile polarized views on how to re-establish a marina that is acceptable to the city's boaters and financial interests, while bringing one of the world's most successful hedge funds to the city's South End.

"I thought we'd reached this point where this was entirely a waste of time and a failed proposal," Democratic mayoral nominee David Martin said Wednesday. --| I think the majority of people do not believe the Magee Avenue site and the public improvements agreement were a good deal, and I am opposed to it."

Former Lt. Gov. Michael Fedele, the Republican nominee for mayor, said he believes that ultimately BLT's decision to withdraw the agreement was a smart one after the Planning Board put forward a series of conditions two weeks ago that it had hoped to add to the pact.

Fedele said the time between now and the swearing-in of the next mayor should give the developer, the city and concerned residents time to consider a reworked deal that would be better received by local land-use boards and critics of the first proposal.

Fedele has said he supports bringing Bridgewater Associates to the South End for the economic benefits he said it would provide Stamford, but said the substitute boatyard furnished by BLT needs to provide services and amenities on par with those of Brewer's Yacht Haven West, the boatyard BLT tore down without land-use board permission in 2011.

"My hopes are in this period of five weeks between now and the election, the BLT folks will look at the recommendations that came up in the planning board and public hearing to see if they make sense relative to that site (205 Magee Avenue)," Fedele said. --| Obviously economic growth and jobs are important but I also said the boatyard that provides the services and amenities that are equal or better than the one at Brewer's is needed. We need to maintain the character of who we are in the city and that are unique to the city and town."

Board of Finance member Kathleen Murphy, who is running for mayor as an independent, said the sudden withdrawal of the license application gives city officials time to consult independent legal counsel in advance of the expected next approval process that she said was missing from considering the first pact.

Murphy said when dealing with the city's most powerful developer, the city needs sound legal advice to legitimate all its actions and properly evaluate the full ramifications of the deal and avoid buckling under the threat of legal action by the developer if the city turns aside their demands.

During the impasse, Murphy has maintained that BLT should be denied development rights to its Bateman Way property under the conditions of the zoning

approval agreement for the Harbor Point complex ratified in 2007, and should be forced to construct a new boatyard on the property.

BLT maintains it is entitled under the agreement to pursue redeveloping the boatyard site if it provides a substitute boatyard that is equal or better than the former facility.

"I think (the boatyard) is the best use of the property and before we give up all the tourist dollars and jobs that would flow in here we need to understand the benefits of a new boatyard in that location," Murphy said. --|I think all the agreements need to be professionally done to make sure when we are dealing with a third party the boards are aware of what they are doing and the third party is also aware of what they need to do."

Kevin Dailey, a Stamford resident who opposed the licensing agreement, said while heartened by the abandonment of what he views as a poor deal for Stamford taxpayers said anything less than an outright rejection of a commercial redevelopment of the 14-acre former boatyard site would be an unacceptable compromise of the city's integrity.

"At what point does the city just say: put the boatyard back?" Dailey said. "If I was running the city I would give them a choice of either rebuilding a marina or leave it the way it is and keep racking up fines."

After planning board members tried to offer potential amendments to the 40-page document two weeks ago, BLT lawyer and spokesman John Freeman told the board Tuesday night that the developer had asked the city to withdraw the agreement so the firm could mull the breadth of concerns that surfaced during the two month public hearing process.

"The planning board came back and said they wanted this and that it it turned into a different package," Al Koproski, a Shippan resident who supported the deal said. "Consequently I think (BLT) did the right thing and rescinded what they are doing to see if they can come up with something more amenable(to everyone)."

Attempts to reach Freeman on Wednesday were unsuccessful, but on Tuesday he issued a statement reiterating the benefits of the development and the withdrawal as an opportunity to work with city officials and residents to build consensus for their redevelopment plan.

"We appreciate the feedback and input received during the Planning Board's review. To allow us time to consider and respond to the Board's comments, we have asked the administration to withdraw the application," Freeman's statement said. "This will provide us the opportunity to work with City officials to build greater consensus. Ultimately, this project will create new amenities for Stamford residents, boost the city's economy and bolster the ongoing revitalization of the South End."

During the public hearing process begun in August, dozens of boaters and residents argued to reject the pact raising concerns about the fairness of the deal for the city including whether the \$5 million in spending on public improvements from BLT to build a new animal shelter was too paltry a sum for the BLT illegally demolishing a 14-acre boatyard on Bateman Way where it hoped Bridgewater now hopes to build its new corporate home.

More fundamentally, opponents challenged the underlying legitimacy of the deal on account of BLT's decision to illegally demolish Brewer's Yacht Haven West on the site where it now wishes to build Bridgewater, whether the established approval process complied with the city's charter, and the inclusion of deed-protected parkland to the developer to include in its replacement boatyard site at 205 Magee Avenue.

Under the now abandoned deal BLT would have provided the city \$5 million in public improvements spending to build a new municipal animal shelter and various improvements to Czescik Marina, and Kosciuszko and Cummings Parks.

A smaller group of supporters spoke in favor of the deal, including many South End business owners and representatives of the business community urging a quick ratification of the deal on account of Bridgewater's pledge to bring 1,200 jobs to the city's South End.

"I think it's a great thing for the city to increase the tax base and bring in people who will buy houses and help all sorts of businesses," Koproski said. "I just want to see what's best for the city and look at this as being best for the city."