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Bronx Groups Demand a Voice in a Landmark's Revival

By [TERRY PRISTIN](#)

Residents of the northwest Bronx have long taken a proprietary interest in the Kingsbridge Armory, a huge city-owned Romanesque-style fortress that looms over the elevated subway tracks on Jerome Avenue.

Hundreds of people mobilized against a redevelopment plan in 2000 because it did not include classrooms to alleviate severe overcrowding in the local schools. The plan eventually died.

Then, local groups helped persuade the city to spend \$31 million replacing the roof and making other repairs to the red brick structure, which has not been used for more than a decade.

Now community organizers in the area, one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, are seeking a private contract with the Related Companies, the developer chosen by the city in April to transform the Kingsbridge Armory into a shopping mall with 575,000 square feet of retail space, including a department store, a multiscreen movie theater and restaurants.

The Kingsbridge Armory Redevelopment Alliance, a coalition of 19 community, church and labor groups, said it would withhold its support for the \$310 million project unless Related guaranteed specified wage and hiring standards for workers and tenants. The groups are also seeking athletic and recreational space, room for cultural programs and social services and opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

"We know how much the stores are going to make off this community," said Ronn Jordan, an alliance leader and a vice president of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, a group formed in 1974. "We want to make sure they are not exploiting us."

In recent years, a growing number of private pacts, known as community benefits agreements, or C.B.A.'s, have smoothed the way for developments around the country, including Related's Grand Avenue project in downtown Los Angeles.

But only a few such agreements have been forged in New York. In 2005, the Bloomberg administration publicly applauded a private agreement between housing advocates and Forest City Ratner, the developer of [Atlantic Yards](#) in Brooklyn, but now it no longer supports the concept.

"When you do a C.B.A., the decision may be made in a vacuum, and that's what we're looking to avoid," Seth W. Pinsky, president of the city's Economic Development Corporation, said in an interview last week. "We're not opposed to benefits for the community, and we're not opposed to community involvement. But we just think it should be part of the larger process."

He said the city's land-use process "gives ample opportunity for the community's voice to be heard."

Proposals are reviewed by the local community board, whose members are appointed by the borough president and the City Council member representing the district. The board's powers are only advisory.

The city's stance is shortsighted, said Julian Gross, a San Francisco lawyer who directs the legal program of the Partnership for Working Families, an advocacy organization. "They should see a private benefits agreement as a way to give a project a huge boost in terms of public perception and community support," said Mr. Gross, who advised the Kingsbridge alliance.

Mr. Pinsky said that members of the Kingsbridge alliance have been included in discussions about the armory from the outset, and their concerns were reflected in the 2006 document asking for proposals from developers.

The document said, for example, that the city would "look favorably" on proposals that maximized the number of jobs paying \$10 an hour or more, and developers were "strongly encouraged" to make space available at reduced rents for community uses.

But Mr. Jordan said the Kingsbridge alliance, known as KARA, needs guarantees. "For KARA to support this project, we need to have an enforceable agreement between KARA and the developer," said Mr. Jordan, who has been involved with the armory since 1995.

Completed in 1917, the armory occupies a full block from Jerome Avenue to Reservoir Avenue and West 195th Street to Kingsbridge Road. The main drill hall measures 300 feet by 600 feet and is spanned by vaulted steel trusses that rise 110 feet above the floor.

The building, which also contains a grand 35,000-square-foot entrance with a vaulted ceiling known as a head-house, is a federal, state and city landmark.

Though the nearby schools are still so crowded that parking lots are used as playgrounds, the armory is unsuitable for a school, city officials say. Two new schools could be built next to the armory if two state-owned auxiliary buildings along 195th Street that are now used by the National Guard were torn down. Mr. Pinsky said the city was trying to find new quarters for the Guard, but classrooms are not part of the Related project.

Related has already negotiated one community benefits agreement in the Bronx, for its Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market, a big-box shopping center that is under construction. But that agreement — like a handful of others that have been made in New York — has drawn criticism from advocates and scholars for being weaker than those in other states. At Gateway Center, only three local groups were parties to the agreement and few obligations were actually imposed on Related, Mr. Gross said.

Glenn Goldstein, the president of Related Retail, bristled at the criticism. "I'm not sure there has been another project that has been as responsive to the needs and desires of the community," he said. He pledged that Related would be just as responsive to the armory community, whether or not there is a benefits agreement. "We'll be spending a lot of time with the community board," he said. "That's just part of how we develop projects."

Gregory Faulkner, the chairman of the Community Board 7, whose area includes the armory, said it was now up to his board to assume a leadership role. "There are more voices than KARA," he said.

Mr. Faulkner said many people in the community want the new mall to include a "top notch" food market, something that is not on the alliance's agenda.

Jeffrey Eichler, a coordinator for the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union/UFCW, said one of the alliance's objectives was to avoid harming existing businesses, including the Associated Supermarket on Jerome Avenue, opposite the armory, which is unionized.

Disagreement over a single issue should not rule out a benefits agreement, said Patricia E. Salkin, the director of the Government Law Center of the Albany Law School. "Some of the things that could be the subject of a C.B.A. may not wind up being in the C.B.A.," she said. "But that doesn't mean you can't have a C.B.A."

The Kingsbridge alliance will not be the only group in New York resisting the city's opposition to benefits agreements. In East Harlem, Community Board 11 was asked to approve a plan for a mixed-use development on East 125th Street without knowing who the developer would be and, therefore, without having a chance to negotiate for benefits, including wage and hiring guarantees, said Robert Rodriguez, the board chairman. The board recently rejected the plan.

Mr. Pinsky said the developer for that project would soon be selected.

"I think there's definite value to having a C.B.A.," Mr. Rodriguez said. "The city is not going to be the best negotiator for community benefits. The community needs to negotiate its own agreement independently."

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