

South End News

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Nearing its end: What now for the Columbus Center site?

Officials believe a state-led clean-up is likely

BY TRIPP UNDERWOOD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The ill-fated Columbus Center, a proposed six-building, \$800-million-plus complex that would contain condos, a hotel, business offices, and retail shops in air space above the Mass Pike between Back Bay and the South End, may never be built—which may not surprise many after years of delays.

On Tuesday, Feb. 9, Massachusetts transportation officials told Columbus Center developers they are in default of their 99-year lease of the property for a number of violations, including failing to complete proposed building projects on time and maintain the construction sites to Department of Transportation standards.

Work on the long troubled de-

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Much like construction on the site, the Columbus Center website is no longer active. Photo: Tripp Underwood

velopment has been sparse since its inception 14 years ago, but there has been no official activity on the property since last fall when clean up of the area stopped abruptly.

Two of the lease-holders on the

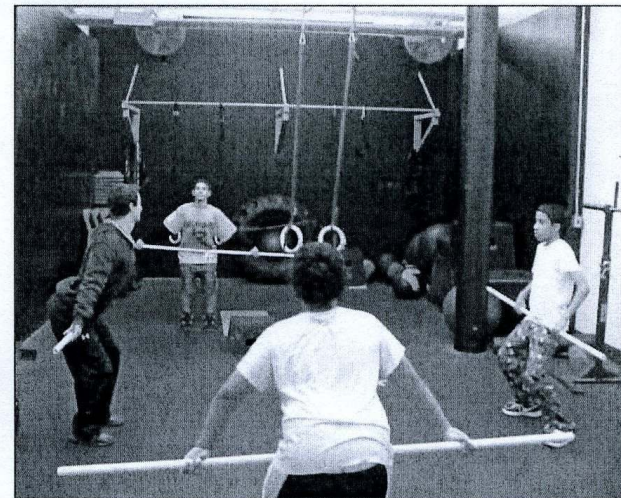
land slated for the project, Boston-based WinnCompanies and the California state pension fund known as CalPERS, have been given a month to

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Dance expert Wyoma held a free dance class for children and families at the South End Branch library on Wednesday morning, Feb. 17. A lively group learned African and Caribbean dances as part of the Boston Public Library's February Black History Month programming. Photo: Marlene Karas

Lifting local youth out of despair



Revolution Fitness has given InnerCity Weightlifting free space to train its 22 members.

InnerCity Weightlifting looks to empower the disadvantaged

BY MIKE ROBERTS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Born in a hostile, underserved community in East Boston, Jerome gravitated toward the only sense of order he had ever known: a gang. As his malleable, developing mind entered its teenage years, the gang seemed like a place that could provide a sense of camaraderie and prestige—the sense of purpose

Jerome had been searching for. However, once he joined, the allure of the gang quickly disappeared and the harsh, violent reality set in. Today, Jerome finds himself second-guessing his choices, wishing there were other options.

For any outsider, this situation would be absolutely foreign, but Jon Feinman—founder and executive director of InnerCity Weightlifting—is quickly learning to understand it and how to teach kids that there are alternatives.

Based out of Revolution Fitness, 209 Columbus Avenue,

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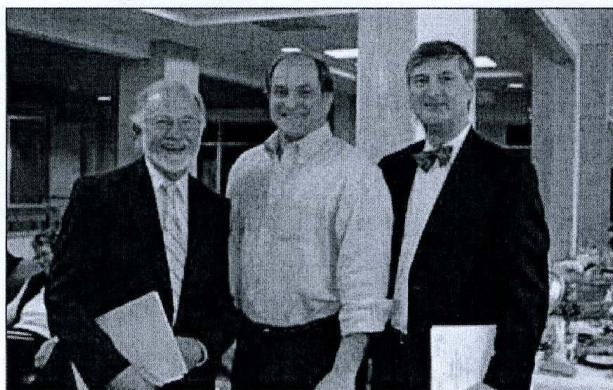
South End Community Health Center aims high for the future

Local and national politicians join staff and neighbors at annual meeting

BY KATE VANDER WIEDE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Congressman Mike Capuano and State Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz bookended the South End Community Health Center's (SECHC) annual meeting Thursday, Feb. 11, at the center's 1601 Washington Street address, where staff celebrated their

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Executive Director Bob Johnson, Congressman Mike Capuano, and Board President Kevin Lee Hepner gathered after Capuano's speech on Thursday at the South End Community Health Center on Washington Street. Photo: Kate Vander Wiede

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Health Center

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accomplishments and laid out their future.

The meeting began with Capuano, who paced the front of the room while speaking to the crowd of 50, most of whom were staff at the center. Capuano's speech was heavily focused on the recent Massachusetts special election, the state of national health care reform—which he reported was “on life support”—and how the community could help ensure health care for everyone. Capuano praised the center for being an example of success in difficult times, and thanked the staff for their ongoing efforts.

“This is where the rubber meets the road in a real serious way ... the people that work here, the people that support the health centers, they're doing great work,” he said.

This work was evident as the night went on.

Board President Kevin Lee Hepner presented awards to outstanding board members and employees before new Executive Director Bob Johnson discussed SEHC's 2009 successes. These included implementing an electronic medical records system with the financial support of Boston Medical Center and the Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, receiving \$10 million over five years to expand mental health services, qualifying for federal subsidies, and receiving \$300,000 in funding through the Children's Health Insurance Program Reauthorization Act.

Johnson took the reins as executive director in May 2009, when Tristram Blake stepped down after 38 years in the position. Noting that Blake's tenure was a “hard act” to follow, Johnson described to *South End News* how the incoming flow of money would change the center during his first full year.

“We are starting to get these grants and build up our departments and it really means building up everything—our support staff, our nursing staff,” he said. “I think it is a rebuilding year.”

Alongside this rebuilding comes change. In fact, SEHC has already seen changes over the last year; after stagnancy in hiring over the last three years, the center brought on over 30 employees in 2009, including a new medical director, a director of nursing, a dental director and a chief financial officer. Reorganization also led former director of human resources Rosette Martinez to a new role as director of community programming.

Despite all the new faces in management, the staff at the meeting seemed content. Johnson thanked the veteran staff for being instrumental in a smooth transition.

“I want to thank all the veteran or existing managers for putting up with all the new managers and the staff. ... I know we've been a pain in the neck and you've had to answer many, many questions. We thank you,” he said.

One of these veteran managers, Martinez, gave a brief but memorable speech. Charged with the task of finding, insuring and retaining 1,500 Latino children in the Children's Health Insurance Program over the next two years, Martinez made it clear that she expected nothing but success. Her determined voice echoed from the center's third floor as she announced how she and her team planned to achieve this goal.

“We will try to mobilize volunteers in target communities who will then be our referral source. ... We will do outreach to the schools, housing, commercial sites, childhood programs, shelters, school pantries. You name it, we will be there,” she said.

Martinez embodied the event's predominant attitude: in the face of massive change, she still felt motivation and commitment.

Throughout the night it became clear that despite local and national struggles with health care, SEHC was focused on not just meeting the South End's needs, but surpassing them.

New Medical Director Pablo Hernandez, who created a family medicine department after his arrival at SEHC six months ago, spoke at the meeting about the word *excelsior*—which he said means to always aim upward and strive to be better. He promised that he would help the health center seek *excelsior* in the face of future change, and borrowed a phrase from Abraham Lincoln to inspire his staff to do the same: “The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise high with the occasion.”

Chang-Diaz ended the meeting by taking questions and describing how her office has shown commitment to health care. After speaking with constituents, Chang-Diaz explained to *South End News* why health care is an issue her office cares about.

“You want families to be able to do for themselves, be self-sustaining and all of the good things that we want,” she said. “But you have to provide the basics or assure access to some of the basics—health care, education, safety ... they are at the heart of what people need and what people are asking for.”

Weightlifting

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InnerCity Weightlifting takes a proactive approach to helping at-risk kids make better life choices. The free program, which officially started Jan. 5, has 22 members and a long waiting list. The organization targets urban youth on a direct path to gang involvement, current members trying to get out, former gang members, and those that are victims of abuse.

“Basically, we walk into schools and say, ‘Give me the ones that you don't think have a chance,’” said Feinman.

Students attend two to three practices per week, which entail two straight hours of high-level Olympic weight training followed by an hour of homework help and a protein shake. Each of the roughly ten coaches, all working on a volunteer basis, offers different types of support in his or her own unique way.

“We're all pretty well rounded. I was previously a math and physics teacher, now I'm a business owner, so I can give educational and career advice,” explained coach Yasha Kahn.

Feinman, 26 years old and originally from Amherst, Mass., has a lean physique and is currently a competitive Olympic-style lifter at the 62kg weight class. He hadn't previously been involved in anything similar to his organization, but after a successful soccer career at Bryant University, Feinman had an eye-opening experience at Athletes in Service—an AmeriCorps National Community Service Program—where he saw a need for this type of program.

“Athletes in Service was the first time I really looked back on the way it was when I grew up, saw how good I had it and how different these kids had it. I always had very supportive parents and coaches who told me I could do anything and a lot of these kids don't have any of that,” he explained.

Subsequent to his year of community service, Feinman found employment as a personal trainer at Revolution Fitness, but stayed involved by training students that were on house arrest and in youth correctional facilities.

Eventually, he put his idea on paper

and pitched the nonprofit to Revolution Fitness owner and founder Derek Christensen, who allows Feinman to operate in unutilized rooms during off-peak hours at no cost. While space is currently limited to what is available at the gym, Feinman expects to create a working model, then pervasively scale it across the city and ultimately the county.

“It's an opportunity for us as a locally owned and operated gym to give back to the community,” said Christensen, adding, “Revolution Fitness will offer Jon the space as long as he needs it or until he outgrows what we can offer.”

Feinman's initial step will be to attain a sustainable funding source to create InnerCity Weightlifting's central headquarters. However, like any new business owner taking on the difficult task of raising capital, he faces similar pains of inexperience. As a result, after being accepted and awarded a partial scholarship, Feinman has enrolled in Babson's MBA program, where he's concentrating on entrepreneurialism, and is also closely working with the Boston Recreation Department on plans to renovate five existing community centers.

“We want to ideally have 24/7 safe houses with trained staff members located all over the city for our members to go to,” he said.

The group of 22 is highly diverse, from various parts of the city and different gang origins, but there haven't been any behavioral issues yet. Feinman noted that a lot of the members are not used to being in a supportive environment and the moment they realize they're not on the street anymore, they begin to open up. It quickly becomes less about where a kid is from and more about learning and lifting.

“We get together, no arguing, just lifting,” one student said.

InnerCity Weightlifting stresses the fact that everything the members do is voluntary. If they don't want to participate one day in a workout or stay for homework help after practice, they are not mandated to do so. The coaches are simply there to provide them with education, support, and to help them make better life decisions.

“The last thing we want is a power struggle, unless it's a power struggle with the weight,” said Feinman.

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