Re: Public Inquiry - Stadium
To: Rose Catenezi,
City Clerk, City of Hamilton,
Hamilton City Hall,
71 Main St. W.
Hamilton, ON.
L8P 4J5.

Dear Rose Catenezi:

Please be advised that I am requesting that a public inquiry be held into what has become referred to as the stadium location "debacle."

When I had first learned from the Hamilton Spectator editorial that Mayor Eisenburger, City Manager Chris Murray, and Howard Elliott in that article of Feb 17/10 had been thoroughly promoting the West Stalino site to build a replacement stadium for Iron Wolves, I was already convinced that there was something happening that was beyond was was immediately apparent that needed to be investigated.

From what I have learned since then, I am even more convinced of this. Please let me know in writing what I well need to do, if any, beyond this letter.

Thank you.
Valerie St. John
When will we ‘end the madness?’

BY EMMA REILLY

The city is still months away and millions of dollars short of resolving the Pan Am stadium debate.

At city council’s penultimate meeting Tuesday, council did not officially approve the CP rail yard site at Aberdeen Avenue and Longwood Road because crucial pieces of information weren’t available.

The city still has to finalize several key details, including how it’s going to bridge a funding gap of at least $35.7 million.

That means the final decision on the Pan Am Games will be left to the councillors set to be elected Oct. 25, sparing the current council from making a controversial decision less than two weeks before voters go to the polls.

“The city has spent $50 million on land in the west harbour, formerly earmarked as the stadium site but abandoned after the Tiger-Cats said the team would refuse to play there.

“They’re also a $4.1 million funding gap to build a permanent velodrome.

Added to the $232 million shortfall for construction of the stadium that leaves the city looking for an additional $55 million, plus funding for land-related costs such as remediation.

The city and the Ticats are looking to the upper levels of government to come up with extra funding.

Though the province has sent positive signals about bumping up its funding levels, the federal government says it needs more time to decide whether to commit extra funding.

That’s one of the reasons why staff advised councillors to put off a decision until after the election.

Though the city and the Tiger-Cats are co-operating, neither side is entirely happy with the site.

Mitchell told councillors that private funding hasn’t come as easily because the city didn’t choose a suburban greenfield with lots of space for development.

“If you want private sector involvement, development’s going to be a large part of that. If you’re going to want to attract a vast amount of private sector investment, you have to go to where the private sector is going to make a lot of money,”

Eisenberger made it clear his preferred location is still the west harbour. He expressed concern that the city hadn’t allocated “a dollar” to west harbour redevelopment so far.

“My preferred option has been the west harbour. That would have been, in my view, perfect,” he said.

But compromise is working through and finding solutions for everyone.

Though several councillors mentioned they were pleased with the city’s progress on the CP site, councillors Sam Merulla and Brian McHattie — the only two councillors who voted against moving forward with the CP land — told council the public doesn’t want a Pan Am stadium.

Merulla said the city keeps trying new sites and not finding workable solutions.

“Insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and over and expecting the same results,” he said.

“At what point are we going to end the madness?”

The next Pan Am update will be delivered to the newly elected council in January 2011.

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Sleeping on the job pays off for council

Nearly all the Hamilton councillors running for re-election must be sloppily kissing their respective lucky amulets right now. Thanks to the new Feb. 1, 2011, deadline from Pan Am Games organizers HostCo, they no longer have to worry about defending their positions on the stadium until the Oct. 25 municipal election has come and gone.

For the incumbents who’ve been party to the all miscalculations, deadlocks and short-sighted decision-making around the stadium debacle, getting the new deadline is like falling into a septic tank and coming out clutching a gold coin. As they wriggle and writhe their way along the campaign trail, they neither have to justify spending about $160 million on a new stadium nor defend risking the future of the Hamilton Tiger-Cats by rejecting the proposal.

By my count, this is now the seventh time the Pan Am organizers have extended the drop-dead date, giving Hamilton yet more time to get its disorderly house in order.

The repeated extensions not only demonstrate remarkable patience by HostCo and its provincial and federal funding masters; it’s indicative of how willing they all are to help the city, despite itself, find a way to replace the aging Ivor Wynne with senior government assistance.

HostCo’s latest expression of goodwill — they say its final and absolute last one — comes at a time when the city and Tiger-Cats are finally singing the same torch song about the CP rail lands at Aberdeen and Longwood.

Fortunately, the extension gives city manager Chris Murray and his team some much-needed breathing space to continue working their magic as they try to nail down additional provincial and federal support to bridge a capital construction funding gap of some $41 million, excluding the new $10-million commitment from the Ticats.

Unfortunately, the new timeline also gives some undeserved cover to all the councillors who helped fashion this doomsday script through their lack of attention and scrutiny.

Since everything is up in the air, they can plausibly tell voters the game is still in play. But what the electorate should be doing is scorching their feet a little over their past actions on this file.

There’s plenty of blame to share. The Ticats should have come out swinging the day after council irresponsibly took Confederation Park off the list of possible sites.

And the Cats should have been much more forthright and more honest much earlier about their reservations and concerns over the west harbour. By the time they finally said they simply wouldn’t play there, a lot of valuable time had been lost through mixed messaging.

Still, how on earth did all of council miss the fundamental fact that funding for a full-size stadium was dependent on having a full-time legacy tenant?

The Ticats knew it. Senior city staff knew financial sustainability was a key deliverable. How did council miss it?

Simple. Individually and collectively, they didn’t ask anything like the right questions until it was almost too late.

They were trying to make up for that yesterday during the staff update on the CP site.

But the fact is, until now many of them virtually sleepwalked their way through the stadium debate, uncharacteristically taking their direction from Mayor Fred Eisenberger.

Certainly Eisenberger happily and stubbornly led the parade. Nonetheless, you’ll recall that in August, council voted 12-3 in favour of the west harbour even though staff repeatedly warned a large stadium without the Ticats as a tenant wasn’t financially viable. More valuable time lost.

If Eisenberger was turning a blind eye to the smoke signals, most councillors were wearing blinkers of their own making.

Two weeks later, of course, the west harbour stadium was suddenly on life support after HostCo quietly told city officials that based on the city’s business plan, they would only fund a 5,000-seat stadium.

Thus began the last-minute scramble to find a compromise site.

Perhaps senior city staffers should have been more direct and spoken out sooner.

Perhaps HostCo CEO Ian Troop should have dropped a strong word in Eisenberger’s ear earlier.

Regardless, our city councillors needed to ask the kind of hard questions about the west harbour that they’re now asking about the CP site. What a pity that HostCo’s new post-election deadline actually rewards them for sleeping on the job.

Andrew Dreschel’s commentary appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.
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