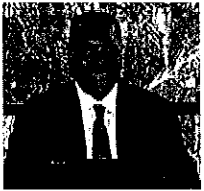


FUTURE OF OVERTOWN MARKET STILL IN DOUBT



Written by CYNTHIA ROBY



Special to South Florida Times

MIAMI — Officials of the Southeast Overtown/Park West Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) are denying reports that they are forcing out a farmers market in order to use its land for a charter school.

"On the record, there are no plans for that property," David Karsh, the CRA's director of communications, said at an April 7 meeting between CRA administrators and Marvin Dunn, founder of the Roots in the City market at Northwest Third Avenue and 10th Street in Miami's Overtown neighborhood.

"I'm getting calls saying you are building this or that, you are building a school. It's not true. I'll say it again: There are no plans for anything there," Karsh said.

Dunn has accused the CRA of starving his three-year-old project of funding, saying it was known that a charter school was being planned for the property.

At the meeting, Pieter A. Bockweg, the CRA's executive director, said the agency is willing to resume funding of Roots in the City "as it is today."

He explained it this way: "No farmers market or farm ... only the landscaping institute, as well as the beautification of the property. That was the original grant to begin with."

The CRA does not fund job programs, only job training programs, Bockweg said.

Between 2008 and 2010, the CRA provided \$100,000 annually in grants to Roots in the City's landscape training program. The project's current grant will run out on April 26.

Bockweg made it clear that more funding will not come without changes to the terms of any new grant.

"You need to have a revolving door of people going through and graduating," Bockweg told Dunn. That was an apparent reference to a low graduation rate from the program. Only a small number of people have graduated or found jobs, he said.

Dunn's agreement with the CRA states that every year he must train at least 16 people. In 2008, six were trained, five graduated and three got jobs. In 2009, six were trained; one graduated and got a job.

"We are waiting for the 2010 numbers," Karsh said in a previous interview.

Bockweg proposed that Dunn shorten the length of training to three months. The grant proposal was originally written for the program to run 12 months, Chelsa Arcscott, the CRA's program administrator said. "Many of the trainees were dropping out over the course of the 12 months because they

were either incarcerated, changed jobs or lost interest," she said.

Bockweg also suggested that Dunn institute an orientation program and contact the new culinary institute at Miami Dade College's nearby Wolfson Campus to explore ways of involving the trainees in his program.

The meeting at the CRA's offices at 49 NW Fifth St. in downtown Miami took place despite the fact

that Dunn had said he received a letter on April 6 signed by Bockweg notifying him that Dunn's grant application for \$149,000 had been denied. Dunn said he continued with the meeting hoping to resolve issues relating to food justice for Overtown.

"There is no money for the urban farm and no support for the farmers market, just for the training program," Dunn said. "I want them to change their priorities."

Karsh said in an interview that the CRA letter Dunn was referring to was a response to a separate grant application from the retired Florida International University professor for the farmers market itself, not the landscaping institute.

"The CRA does not fund farmers markets; they have never funded farmers markets. We have exclusively funded Dr. Dunn's landscape training program," Karsh said.

Dunn announced last week that he hand-delivered a letter to the home of Miami Heat superstar LeBron James – a neighbor – asking for financial support for his farmers market. As of mid-week, he had not received a response.

Dunn said this week he sent similar appeals for financial help to other Heat players – Chris Bosh, Dwyane Wade and Udonis Haslem, who is from Overtown – and to the Miami Heat Charitable Fund. The dollar amount requested was not disclosed.

Dunn briefly shut the market down last month after, he said, a city code enforcement officer cited the landowners, South Florida Smart Growth Land Trust, for selling produce on a vacant lot without a permit.

"The city was embarrassed that they were closing down a fresh produce market, so they scrambled to come up with a solution," Dunn said.

Dunn said he has to return to the city in six months to get another resolution that would allow the market to operate for an additional six months.

But, according to Pat Santangelo, the city's public affairs officer, no citation was issued and at no time did the city ever contemplate shutting down the farmers market.

"It was a notice of [lack of] compliance," Santangelo said.

Dunn is required to have a certificate of use permit that costs \$250 for the first year but is waived for non-profit organizations, as well as an unlimited Class I permit that costs \$73, Santangelo said.

"Every year since [the market] was opened, Dr. Dunn has been getting the proper documents," Santangelo said. "Basically he was given a notice to say that the paperwork they have to turn in every year was late."

That paperwork is completed yearly and the CRA has it on file for Roots in the City, Santangelo said. "They need to have that in order to get their grants," he said.

Dunn said in an interview after the meeting that he was given a three-month extension to prepare a new grant application. It will be for more money and the project will also include revitalizing a botanical garden at the northwest corner of Northwest Third Avenue and 14th Street in Overtown.

Roots in the City built and cared for the garden for 15 years at no cost to the county, which owns most of the site, Dunn said. The garden was maintained by Dunn's students, when he was teaching at FIU, and a few volunteers.

With the coming of the economic recession, Roots in the City could no longer afford to care for the garden, Dunn said. "The county said they could take care of it ... look at it now," he said.

No CRA funds were involved in that initiative, Dunn said, "but they did pay the water bill in earlier years."

"In our new grant application to the CRA, I am asking them to allow us to bring the garden back and to use it as a site primarily for growing botanicals and not vegetables," he said.

The revised grant proposal's dollar amount was not disclosed.

"The battle is far from over," Dunn said. "I still want money for the urban farm. My next step, if I can, will be to go before the CRA to get them to add jobs to their priorities."

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