

U.S officials look at Downtown Brooklyn for economic abuse

By Stephen Witt
Wednesday, March 3, 2010 9:11 PM EST



Courier-Life Publications

While advocates for the poor admit that a local economic boost hardly compares to life-and-death abuses around the world, they appeared downright giddy to get federal officials to inspect a downtown Brooklyn site as a possible blemish on this country's human rights record.

That after U.S. State Department officials toured the demolished Albee Square Mall with advocates and community members in preparation for the United Nations Human Rights Council's review of this country on human rights abuses.

The site is currently being developed by Albee Development LLC into a mixed-use residential/retail project including affordable housing with the help of a \$20 million tax free federal stimulus bond issuance.

"It's not genocide in Burma, but the thing about human rights is it's not selective," said Kristi Barnes of New York Jobs with Justice. "You can't choose to uphold them in other parts of the world but not here at home."

On the tour with the advocates and state department officials was displaced small business owner Maisha Morales, who explained to government officials how she was evicted from her store in the Gallery Mall at Albee Square.

"My rent has more than tripled since I was forced to move, and I can't afford to have employees anymore. Small businesses make an important contribution to the community, but they aren't being adequately supported," she said.

Albee Development spokesperson Tom Montvel-Cohen noted the stimulus funds are a tax exempt loan that allows the project to go forward in a tough economy.

"The project team is working very hard in a bad economy to create a project that brings jobs and affordable housing to an area that badly needs them," he said.

The tour of the site was one of several around the country for the State Department officials, who might incorporate their concerns about the project in the United Nations Periodic Review.

"This is a very important process to measure our nation's compliance with universally accepted human rights," said Ejim Dike of the Urban Justice Center.

“Elevating and including the right to employment and decent work in the US report could lead to policy changes that immediately improve peoples’ lives and set an important precedent for the international community,” she added.