

METRO

T ON THE LAWN



JOEL CAIRO

Gerard Weihe of the Bronx makes tidy catch yesterday as 5- and 6-year-old Little Leaguers from across the city bring T-ball to the grounds of Gracie Mansion for the first time. Looking on were Mayor Bloomberg and Roberto Clemente Jr., lead organizer of the Roberto Clemente Sr. Foundation.

BJ's pulls out of Bx. — again

BY BILL EGBERT
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

AFTER YEARS of Machiavellian maneuvering, BJ's Warehouse Club has abandoned its efforts to open in the East Bronx.

The City Planning Commission received word Tuesday from the developer, The Related Companies, that it was withdrawing a proposal to open a 130,000-square-foot BJ's on Brush Ave. between Soundview and Castle Hill.

"I'm not overly upset," said City Councilman James Vacca (D-East Bronx). "I was not in favor of a BJ's at that site. I think it would have hurt the remaining grocery stores in that area."

This is the second time Related has pulled its paperwork on the BJ's project; it yanked its previous proposal at the last minute last year when it faced certain defeat in the City Council, which was spooked by fears of a labor backlash over BJ's allegedly anti-union policies.

The chain resubmitted its application later that year, hoping a community benefits agreement being hammered out by the Bronx City Council delegation would blunt opposition.

BJ's and Related found a champion for their second bid in Councilwoman Maria Baez (D-West Bronx), head of the Bronx delegation. Just seven months after she voted with the Land Use subcommittee to kill the plan, she began pushing a draft of the community benefits agreement.

The Daily News linked Baez's conversion to two fund-raisers held that election year at which the practically unopposed

incumbent collected at least \$16,500 in campaign donations from individuals linked to the project.

Records show Baez received at least 23 separate checks from Related's executives, its lawyers and architects, from the owner of the proposed site, and from the lobbyist hired by BJ's Wholesale Club to revive the plan.

The contributions represented 40% of all the campaign money doled out by Related employees in 2005, and nearly 19% of the money Baez raised for her campaign.

But political embarrassment wasn't the reason BJ's withdrew its application a second time, according to the company, but a conclusion that the Brush Ave. site simply didn't meet its needs.

"We remain fully committed to serving the community of the Bronx," said Amy Russ, a spokeswoman for BJ's, which has stores in other parts of the city.

BJ's is slated to open in the new, \$495-million Gateway Center mall in the South Bronx when that project — also developed by Related — is completed in 2009.

That project's course through the political process was eased by a community benefits agreement that, among other things, required the BJ's store at Gateway Center accept food stamps and other government food vouchers — making it the only BJ's Warehouse Club in the nation that will accept them.

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Girls' sports hit hard by bias — study

BY FRANK LOMBARDI
DAILY NEWS CITY HALL BUREAU

GIRLS AREN'T getting the same shot as boys to play team sports in the city's public high schools, Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum reported yesterday.

Despite federal and state laws mandating equal opportunities, more teams are fielded for boys than for girls by a big disparity in most schools — sending a message that "girls' sports are treated as second-class," Gotbaum said.

Based on a study of 2,376 Pub-

lic School Athletic League teams at 185 high schools, Gotbaum and her staff found that 43.6% (or 1,037 teams) are girls' teams, while 54.7% (or 1,299 teams) are boys' teams. And just 1.7%, or 40 teams, are co-ed.

PSAL athletes, unlike those involved in intramural sports, represent their schools in competitions, where they could come to the attention of scouts for college teams, according to Gotbaum's report.

With fewer teams, and with playing schedules that often are relegated to off-season periods,

girls "don't get an equal chance at being awarded an athletic [college] scholarship," Gotbaum said at a City Hall press conference.

"Some might say, 'Girls aren't as interested in sports as boys,'" Gotbaum said. "Well, that's nonsense."

According to Gotbaum, girls involved in team sports "are less likely to develop osteoporosis, breast cancer and diabetes as adults, and more likely to adopt long-term exercise programs."

And they're less likely to use drugs, smoke, have unwanted

pregnancies or commit suicide, she added.

Keith Kalb, a spokesman for Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, said: "Under our watch, the number of girls participating in the Public School Athletic League has jumped 13%, compared to an increase of 10% for boys."

He added, "Despite our efforts over the past three years, girls remain underrepresented in PSAL."

"We agree with the public advocate that we need to do everything we can to ensure that we are creating opportunities for all of our students, including girls."

Gotbaum urged the PSAL and the Department of Education to create new girls' teams whenever possible, especially in schools where the gender bias is most pronounced.

"This is not about taking anything away from boys," Gotbaum asserted.

"This is about making sure that girls have the same opportunity to experience all the benefits that come from playing sports.

"It's the 21st century. Let's level the playing field."

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