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Mell hopes to relocate magnet school to ward

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The Inter-American Magnet School may yet end up in the 33rd Ward, but not at the Addison-Kimball site originally eyed by Ald. Richard Mell.

That location was ruled out by Mayor Richard Daley, "who apparently didn't feel it would be safe enough for the kids (because of the heavy traffic)," Mell told a Thursday, Jan. 27, KEBIC (Kedzie/Elston Business and Industrial Council) luncheon at Abbey Restaurant, 3420 W. Grace St.

Mell said he is now working on another site in his ward, which he declined to identify because, "I don't want to scare anyone off at this stage of the negotiations."

Inter-American, now at 919 W. Barry Ave. in the 44th Ward, is one of three elementary schools the Chicago Public Schools considers beyond repair. The others are on the South Side.

Mell said Inter-American might as well be moved to the 33rd Ward "since a large number of our demographics already attends that school."

On Dec. 1, apparently before Daley vetoed the Addison-Kimball site, one such family wrote the mayor asking him to "act swiftly" on the proposal, noting that their children's admission to Inter-American Magnet School five years ago was "the single, deciding factor" in their decision to remain in the city.

Mell said the 10-acre Addison-Kimball site is now being "seriously looked at" by People's Gas, adding that "some kind of announcement" could come within the next month.

He admitted, however, that he won't start relaxing until the deal is sealed, noting that the property has been seriously considered for several different uses since International Paper Co. closed its Transo Envelope Co. facility several years ago.

Since then, Mell said, Builders Square and Home Depot each wanted to build "big box" stores there, and the St. Vincent DePaul Center even wanted to move its day-care center there from Lincoln Park.

The day-care proposal was nixed by Daley, again because of safety concerns and reportedly because the city still hoped to keep that area zoned industrial, said Mell, adding that the community opposed putting any "big box" stores there because there was already too much traffic congestion along Addison Street.

"You've got three high schools -- Schurz, Lane Tech and Gordon -- and a semiprofessional baseball team, the Chicago Cubs, at the other end of Addison," Mell quipped.

Keeping that property for industrial use may be impossible unless the city is willing to "ante up" with some kind of financial aid or tax incentives, said Mell.

In today's market, he pointed out, manufacturers are typically able to pay only \$5 or \$6 per square foot, compared with residential developers' \$15 and as much as \$24 offered by "big box" stores.

Turning to other topics, Mell promised to push for new legislation to "streamline" the city's licensing procedures, which, he said, have often hamstrung local businesses.

The situation is so bad that some businesses don't even bother to get the required licenses, said Chuck Hadley of the Jane Addams Resource Center.

Mell said the Mayor's Business Express office is supposed to cut through a lot of the red tape and even provide "one-stop shopping" for businesses trying to navigate the licensing labyrinth.

"I guess the third wheel of their van fell off," said Mell. "They try, but...."

Some building projects have even been held up for an entire construction season because there weren't enough "plan examiners" to process permit applications in a timely fashion, said Mell, adding that the "world famous" Arun's Restaurant, 4156 N. Kedzie Ave., almost went to New York a few years ago when it couldn't get the needed building permits until Mell himself intervened.

Mell said he would like to let established contractors working on small and moderate-size projects certify that they are complying with the building code rather than have to wait for the city to check out their plans.

"Understand, we're not talking about new companies, and we're not talking about huge developments," he said. "We're talking about companies with a track record (of building according to code)."

In the meantime, Mell urged any of his constituents with city licensing problems to contact his office before hiring a lawyer on their own.

"Once you hire a lawyer, it's out of our hands," said Mell. "At least check with us first, and see what we can do to help."

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