

LANDMARK WEST!

Statement of LANDMARK WEST! Demanding End of Pay-to-Play Real Estate Deals May 4, 2016

I am Kate Wood, president of LANDMARK WEST!, a not-for-profit community watchdog committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side.

“The fix is in.” It’s an ugly phrase, one that we as community advocates resist, even when the evidence is right in front of us.

If we accepted the fact that the system is hopelessly rigged, how could we continue to show up for public hearings, write letters, sign petitions, hold press conferences? What’s the point of so-called “public process” if the public doesn’t matter?

We keep showing up—and speaking up—because we refuse to abandon our city, even though it often feels as though our city has abandoned us.

How else do you explain...

- **The wall of silence between city agencies and members of the public** when developers and their lobbyists are treated to closed-door meetings and other ex-parte communications with decisionmakers
 - I’m thinking of a specific case outlined in our packets, in which a wealthy and influential Upper West Side institution paid the city’s top lobbyist \$75,000 to pressure the Department of Buildings and Board of Standards & Appeals to delay the revocation of building permits even after community advocates made it clear that the permits had been issued on false pretenses. After months of stonewalling, city agencies finally stopped the project, but only after news of the lobbyist’s possible connection with another real-estate scandal broke.

And how else do you explain...

- **The chronic abuse of our city’s zoning variance and special permits processes** by developers who claim “hardship” in order to maximize profits from our city’s Landmarks
 - Again, referring to a case in our packets, I’m thinking of a developer’s chutzpah in claiming “hardship” for a speculative project that will deface a Landmark and yield a return of 100% for the developer, if approved by the Board of Standards & Appeals.
 - The developer paid the same top lobbyist \$47,000 to influence the Board’s vote.
 - The vote is still pending, but meanwhile neighbors whose quality of life and property values would be severely impacted by this project have been forced to spend that much and more on legal counsel just to level the playing field.

Over, please

And how else do you explain...

- **Long delays in considering potential landmarks and historic districts** where powerful owners are opposed to designation
 - Yet another case in our packets comes from a West End Avenue tenants group fighting the destruction of their homes after the Landmarks Preservation Commission delayed the designation of a historic district until after a developer secured building permits...again, on false pretenses.
 - The same top lobbyist is involved here, too.

Unfortunately, I could go on. Everyone here can point to multiple examples of subterfuge and lobbying employed to game the system so that power and money get their way. And if it's happening on the Upper West Side—one of the most activist and vigilant communities in New York—then it's happening everywhere, every day.

What New York needs now is the political will to end the “business as usual” that destroys New York's neighborhoods.