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COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
COMMITTEE ON
PARKS, RECREATION and CULTURAL AFFAIRS

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- - -
Room 400, City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Wednesday, December 5, 2007, 9:40 a.m.
- - -

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Bill 070999 - To enter into a ground lease
with the Philadelphia Authority for Industrial
Development, under which the City would lease
Belmont Mansion and appurtenant buildings,
grounds, and facilities (collectively, the
"Belmont Mansion Complex") to PAID...

(Full text of ordinance contained herein.)

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COUNCILMEMBERS PRESENT:

15

Blondell Reynolds-Brown, Chair

16

Frank DiCicco

17

Frank Rizzo

18

Marian B. Tasco

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- - -
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American Women's Historical Society
Belmont Mansion Complex

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7 Fairmount Park Commission

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2 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

3 Good morning, good morning. The
4 Council Committee on Parks, Recreation
5 and Cultural Affairs is now in a
6 public hearing to hear testimony on
7 Bill No. 070999.

8 The Councilmembers in
9 attendance are my colleagues: To my
10 extreme left, Councilman Frank Rizzo,
11 Councilwoman Marian Tasco, and
12 Councilman Frank DiCicco.

13 We will now ask the clerk to
14 please read the title of Bill No.
15 070999.

16 THE CLERK: Bill No. 070999,
17 an ordinance authorizing the President
18 of the Fairmount Park Commission and
19 the Executive Director of the
20 Fairmount Park, on behalf of the City
21 of Philadelphia, to enter into a
22 ground lease with the Philadelphia
23 Authority for Industrial Development,
24 under which the City would lease
25 Belmont Mansion and appurtenant

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2 buildings, grounds, and facilities
3 (collectively, the "Belmont Mansion
4 Complex") to PAID, and pursuant to
5 which PAID would enter into a ground
6 sublease with the American Women's
7 Heritage Society, under which AWHS
8 would occupy, operate, and help
9 maintain the Belmont Mansion Complex
10 and develop and operate a museum about
11 the Underground Railroad, under
12 certain terms and conditions.

13 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

14 Thank you very, very much.

15 We would like all those
16 testifying on Bill No. 070999 -- I
17 believe that -- let me be more
18 specific.

19 If I could please ask the
20 president of the American Women
21 Women's Heritage Society Mission to
22 please come forward as well as our
23 leadership with the Fairmount Park
24 Commission, Executive Director Mark
25 Focht.

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2 (Witnesses come forward.)

3 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

4 Good morning.

5 MS. THORNTON: Good morning.

6 MR. FOCHT: Good morning.

7 MS. THORNTON: Ladies and

8 gentlemen, honored members of City

9 Council, I'm Audrey Johnson Thornton,

10 Founder and President of the American

11 Women's Heritage Society of Belmont

12 Mansion.

13 In 1986, the Fairmount Park

14 Commission gave approval of the

15 Society to become stewards of the

16 historic Belmont Mansion, which has

17 been one magnificent thing that has

18 happened here in Philadelphia.

19 Our mission was to preserve,

20 restore, collect, and educate the

21 public about the history and

22 significance of historic Belmont

23 Mansion, the roles of the original

24 owners of the abolition and the

25 Underground Railroad movement and the

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2 relationships of the mansion in the
3 struggle for freedom in Philadelphia.

4 We are a minority-owned
5 501(c)(3) organization that for more
6 than 20 years have provided such
7 stellar stewardship.

8 Incorporated into Philadelphia
9 Fairmount Park in 1868, by 1986
10 Belmont Mansion had suffered from
11 deferred maintenance and abandonment
12 when we took it over. Using
13 organizational funds, we began
14 restoring efforts and revitalization.

15 In a 1987 assessment of ten
16 historic structures in Fairmount Park
17 considered to be at risk, Belmont
18 Mansion was singled out as the most
19 significant structure studied and
20 among the most important in Fairmount
21 Park.

22 Belmont Mansion is listed on
23 the National Register of Historic
24 Places. It is of historical and
25 architectural importance to the

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2 nation. We conducted research on
3 Peters family, the original owners,
4 and discovered involvement with the
5 Underground Railroad.

6 Prior to this discovery,
7 Belmont and Fairmount Park were not
8 included in the history of abolition
9 and the Underground Railroad in
10 Philadelphia. The Peters are
11 significant because of their
12 anti-slavery work began during the
13 revolutionary era while Judge Peters
14 served as George Washington's
15 Secretary of War and ends with
16 Richards Peters, Jr. using the
17 railroad to assist runaways while
18 petitioning the Supreme Court to
19 repeal the Fugitive Slave Act.

20 On July the 4th of 2007,
21 Belmont Mansion opened as an
22 Underground Railroad museum following
23 a \$3 million restoration. We have
24 established memberships with the
25 Greater Philadelphia Tourism and

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2 Marketing Corporation's Quest for
3 Freedom Program, the National Park
4 Services Network to Freedom Program,
5 and the National Underground Railroad
6 Freedom Center Freedom Stations
7 Program.

8 We have adopted the Microsoft
9 School of the Future in Fairmount Park
10 and have initiated a museum training
11 program for more than 20 students.
12 We're open six days a week and have
13 toured more than 3,000 visitors since
14 our July 4th opening. We are the
15 newest Underground Railroad museum in
16 Philadelphia.

17 For more than a decade, we
18 have been engaged in lease
19 negotiations with the Fairmount Park
20 Commission and acknowledge their
21 support and approval of a long-term
22 lease. As agreed, we have confirmed a
23 financial plan to include providing 5
24 percent of annual operating revenue to
25 support maintenance provided by the

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2 City of Philadelphia and are prepared
3 to adhere to the approved lease
4 agreement.

5 Your approval of this bill is
6 critical to our strategic plan and
7 stabilization of our organization's
8 objectives and goals for the next ten
9 years. We have had the support of
10 Mayor John Street and Mayor-elect
11 Nutter Nutter and many, many others
12 and many of our City Councilmembers.

13 So on behalf of my board and
14 membership, we support Council Bill
15 No. 070999 authorizing sublease of the
16 Belmont Mansion Complex to the
17 American Women's Heritage Society and
18 ask City Council for approval. And I
19 thank you.

20 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
21 Well, we thank you for your testimony.

22 And before we proceed to
23 questions, we will hear the testimony
24 from Mark Focht and then open it.

25 MR. FOCHT: Okay.

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2 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

3 Good morning.

4 MR. FOCHT: Good morning,

5 Chairwoman Reynolds-Brown and members

6 of the committee. I'm Mark Focht,

7 Executive Director of the Fairmount

8 Park Commission, and I'm very pleased

9 to appear before you today on behalf

10 of the Fairmount Park Commission in

11 support of Bill No. 070999 authorizing

12 the City of Philadelphia, through

13 Fairmount Park, to enter into a lease

14 with the Philadelphia Authority for

15 Industrial Development, or PAID, for

16 the Belmont complex, including the

17 historic cottage complex and the

18 Belmont Mansion pursuant to which PAID

19 would sublease the facility to the

20 American Women's Heritage Society.

21 This lease is an important

22 step in a decades' long initiative by

23 Fairmount Park and our partner, the

24 American Women's Heritage Society, to

25 save, repair, and restore the Belmont

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2 Mansion complex so that it can be
3 maintained, operated, and interpreted
4 by a self-sustaining nonprofit
5 organization.

6 In 1998, the Park expended
7 approximately \$2 million in capital
8 funding to adaptively renovate the
9 historic 1745 cottage building so that
10 it could properly be used as a
11 catering and meeting facility.
12 Subsequently, the Park undertook a
13 \$3.3 million project to restore the
14 circa 1750 mansion, which was
15 completed this past summer, 2007.

16 As the proprietor of over 200
17 historic properties, Fairmount Park
18 understands the value of finding a
19 suitable tenant who is dedicated to
20 and able to provide the appropriate
21 care and maintenance of a historic
22 property such as the Belmont Mansion
23 complex. We have such a partner in
24 the American Women's Heritage Society,
25 who has been a tenant of this site for

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2 over 20 years.

3 AWHs has prepared and is
4 implementing a business plan that will
5 ensure that the Belmont Mansion
6 complex is cared for and maintained in
7 a self-sustaining manner. At the same
8 time, their business plan ensures that
9 the complex will be available for
10 public access and interpretation of
11 the property's important historical
12 significance.

13 The Belmont Mansion complex
14 possesses a high degree of historical
15 and architectural importance and is an
16 important cultural resource within the
17 Fairmount Park system. The mansion is
18 on the National Register of Historic
19 Places and is nationally known for its
20 ornate -- original ornate plaster
21 ceiling, considered one of the oldest
22 ceilings of its type in America.

23 More recently, through the
24 efforts of AWHs, the Belmont Mansion
25 Complex has been accepted into the

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2 National Park Service's National
3 Underground Railroad Network to
4 Freedom Program. This program seeks
5 to promote programs that commemorate
6 the Underground Railroad, to preserve
7 sites and others resources associated
8 with the Underground Railroad, and to
9 educate the public about the
10 historical significance.

11 In July of this past summer,
12 the Underground Railroad Museum at the
13 Belmont Mansion complex was open to
14 the public and is open six days a
15 week.

16 Fairmount Park's strategic
17 plan, completed in June 2004, with the
18 support of this Council, requires the
19 park to develop and implement a
20 property management plan to improve
21 the park's past management approach
22 for historic properties.
23 Additionally, the park takes very
24 seriously our role to protect our
25 assets which stand as monuments to

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2 Philadelphia's history.

3 We believe that this lease
4 before you today addresses a
5 requirement of this five-year plan and
6 ensures the future well-being of the
7 Belmont Mansion Complex.

8 I would like to thank and
9 acknowledge AWHs President Audrey
10 Johnson Thornton and her board members
11 for the manner in which they have and
12 continue to serve as stewards of this
13 historic property. Therefore, I
14 appear before you today to pledge the
15 support of the Fairmount Park
16 Commission for this legislation and
17 respectively ask that City Council
18 approve Bill No. 070999.

19 I'd be pleased to answer any
20 questions.

21 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
22 Thank you both very, very much for
23 your testimony.

24 MS. THORNTON: Thank you.

25 MR. FOCHT: Thank you.

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2 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

3 Are there any questions or comments or
4 remarks for Ms. Audrey Johnson
5 Thornton or Mr. Mark Focht from any of
6 the Councilmembers?

7 (No questions.)

8 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

9 Well, let me just underscore the
10 remarks made by Mr. Mark Focht wherein
11 you state that Audrey Johnson Thornton
12 and the board members have indeed
13 served as stewards for this historic
14 property. And I would have been
15 vigilant, and like a laser beam
16 focused on doing all it can, to move
17 the Belmont Mansion to the place we're
18 discussing today, so we commend you
19 for that.

20 And we do thank you, Mark
21 Focht, for working intimately so that
22 we could get to this place, 'cause
23 many of us are aware of the wrinkles
24 we had to iron out prior to having
25 this discussion this morning.

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2 So we thank you very, very
3 much for your testimony.

4 MR. FOCHT: Thank you.

5 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
6 Councilwoman Marian Tasco does have a
7 question.

8 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Thank
9 you.

10 I may have missed this because
11 I was talking, but for how long is the
12 ground lease?

13 MR. FOCHT: It's a ten-year
14 lease.

15 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: A
16 ten-year lease, okay.

17 MS. THORNTON: To be renewed
18 every ten years.

19 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Okay.

20 COUNCILMAN RIZZ0: Audrey's
21 starting already to get it renewed.

22 (Laughter.)

23 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Mm-hmm,
24 mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Okay, thank you.

25 MR. FOCHT: Thank you.

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2 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

3 Anyone else?

4 (No further questions.)

5 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

6 We thank you very much for your
7 testimony.

8 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Let me
9 just ask Audrey a question.

10 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

11 Please, please.

12 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: I'm
13 sorry. Have you developed a
14 succession plan for leadership?

15 MS. THORNTON: Yes, yes.
16 We're working on that as we speak.

17 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: All
18 right. Thank you.

19 MS. THORNTON: That's so
20 important that we continue this
21 legacy.

22 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Mm-hmm.

23 MS. THORNTON: For the very
24 reasons that you're thinking as we
25 were.

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2 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

3 Have you sought funding for your
4 succession plan?

5 MS. THORNTON: Pardon me?

6 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:

7 Have you sought funding from a
8 foundation for your succession plan?

9 MS. THORNTON: Yes. We're
10 working with PECO.

11 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: And that
12 helps assure your leadership as well
13 as the financial responsibility that
14 you have.

15 MS. THORNTON: Exactly, yeah.
16 We've come a long way so we got to
17 keep it going.

18 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Okay.
19 Thank you very much.

20 MS. THORNTON: And I
21 appreciate all of the support and help
22 that you all have given me, including
23 you, Mr. Rizzo.

24 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Okay.
25 Well, good luck. You've done a good

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2 job out there, and we congratulate you
3 on your perseverance 'cause I don't
4 know anyone who has worked so hard and
5 worried us so much.

6 (Laughter.)

7 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: And the
8 phone calls and letters and -- but
9 you've been very persuasive and very
10 committed, and the commitment really
11 counts for a lot. So thank you so
12 much for your --

13 MS. THORNTON: Thank you.
14 It's for the City of Philadelphia.

15 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Indeed.
16 Thank you.

17 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
18 And the beauty that all-women
19 organizations have a place that we can
20 call our own in Philadelphia Fairmount
21 Park.

22 MS. THORNTON: Yes.

23 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
24 Thank you very much.

25 MR. FOCHT: Thank you.

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2 MS. THORNTON: Can I introduce
3 some of my people to you?

4 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
5 Yes. Seize the moment.

6 MS. THORNTON: This is Ann
7 Ryan and Carol Smith and Carolyn
8 Short. And this is my --

9 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
10 Members of your board?

11 MS. THORNTON: This is my
12 curator Naomi.

13 NAOMI: Good morning.

14 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
15 Welcome.

16 MS. THORNTON: You got to come
17 see the museum, the new museum. It's
18 fantastic.

19 And Dorothy Sims, who's on the
20 board. And this is Mary Dabney, who
21 is my grants writer and very important
22 to our organization. And Molly is our
23 board member.

24 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
25 What's the name of the last person you

1 12/5/07 - Parks, Rec. - Bill 070999
2 introduced?

3 MS. THORNTON: Molly Robinson.

4 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
5 Welcome to City Council. This is an
6 historic day for the Belmont Mansion.

7 MS. THORNTON: Yes.

8 COUNCILWOMAN TASC0: Is there
9 anyone else here to testify on this
10 bill?

11 MS. THORNTON: And then
12 there's my guys over here (inaudible)
13 from the Fairmount Park.

14 (Laughter.)

15 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
16 Okay. We thank you.

17 MR. FOCHT: Thank you very
18 much.

19 MS. THORNTON: Thank you.

20 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
21 You're welcome.

22 This concludes the testimony
23 on Bill No. 070999. This also
24 concludes our public hearing.

25 And we will now move into a

1 12/5/07 - Parks, Rec. - Bill 070999
2 public meeting.

3 I would ask my colleague
4 Councilwoman Marian Tasco to please
5 make a motion on Bill No. 070999 and
6 also take into account a request for
7 the suspension of the rules.

8 COUNCILWOMAN TASCO: Madam
9 Chair, I move that Bill No. 070999 be
10 reported out of committee with a
11 favorable recommendation and a request
12 for the suspension of the rules so
13 that this bill can be heard at the
14 next session of Council.

15 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
16 Any seconds?

17 (Motion seconded.)

18 COUNCILWOMAN REYNOLDS-BROWN:
19 Bill No. 070999 has been moved and
20 properly seconded.

21 All in favor will say aye.

22 All opposed?

23 Bill No. 070999 will,
24 therefore, be reported out of this
25 committee with a favorable

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2 recommendation and a further move that
3 the rules of Council be suspended so
4 as to permit first reading at the next
5 scheduled session of Philadelphia City
6 Council.

7 This concludes the public
8 meeting of the Council Committee on
9 Parks, Recreation and Cultural
10 Affairs. We thank you for your
11 testimony and your attendance and your
12 interest.

13 Meeting adjourned.

14 (Proceedings end at 9:52 a.m.)

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C E R T I F I C A T E

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the proceedings of the City of Philadelphia Council Committee on Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs are contained fully and accurately in the stenographic notes taken by me on Wednesday, December 5, 2007, and that this is a true and correct statement of same.

JOSEPHINE CARDILLO
Registered Professional Reporter

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