

Human-rights group calls on Sixers to halt arena plans near Chinatown

Philadelphia Inquirer (<https://www.inquirer.com/real-estate/commercial/sixers-downtown-arena-human-rights-housing-20230907.html>) · by Jeff Gammage

A human-rights organization has told the Sixers that their intention to construct a Center City arena may be “inconsistent with international human rights law” and called on the team to immediately halt its plans to build beside Chinatown.

The Shift, which describes itself as “a global movement to secure the human right to housing,” (<https://make-the-shift.org/>) sent a 13-page letter to team owners that said the \$1.55 billion project could push out nearby Chinatown residents and businesses by inflating rents and real-estate values, driving the “mass displacement of one of the last communities of color in Philadelphia’s downtown.”

Sam Freeman, the organization’s director of legal research and advocacy (<https://make-the-shift.org/the-team/>), said the team should work with Chinatown “to ensure that their business practices help realize, rather than interfere with, that community’s human rights.”

Nicole Gainor, a spokesperson for the team on arena matters, said The Shift’s letter “isn’t based on a clear understanding of how we are thoughtfully approaching this project.”

The organization got facts wrong, including the projected timeline for construction, and omitted others, such as the residential component of the team's proposal, she said Thursday.

The group "apparently believes that building an arena on the footings of an already existing mall is somehow a violation of international law," she said. "If this is what project counter-arguments are reduced to, we are fully confident that 76 Place will win the necessary approvals and become the valuable community asset we know it will be."

The Sixers have pledged that construction will not directly displace a single home or business in Chinatown, and say the project can benefit the neighborhood by bringing in game-day business and through improvements such as enhanced security in the area.

Chinatown residents and supporters have said they foresee a slow erosion caused by traffic, crowds and higher property costs. The Shift said it investigated the situation in Philadelphia after being contacted by Chinatown advocates who fear the arena's impact.

The Shift wrote to Josh Harris and David Blitzer, who founded Harris Blitzer Sports & Entertainment, which owns and operates the Sixers, and to David Adelman, a co-owner and the lead developer of the arena that the team is calling 76 Place (<https://www.inquirer.com/business/sixers-arena-plans-harris-blitzer-adelman-comcast-20220727.html>).

The group said it would publish its July 31 letter (<https://make-the-shift.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Letter-of-Concern-from-The-Shift-regarding-Philadelphia-Chinatown-July-31st-2023.pdf>) on Sept. 7, along with any response it received from the team. So far Sixers officials have not replied, the group said.

The Canada-based Shift is led by global director Leilani Farha, a former United Nations special rapporteur on the right to housing (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-housing>). She has helped develop world human-rights standards based on the belief that housing is not a commodity but a social good.

The group sees the housing crisis as among the most pressing challenges of the age, with the cost of renting or buying a home far outpacing the growth of wages around the world. That's driving inequality and making cities unaffordable for the people who make them thrive, the group said.

As part of its operations, The Shift sends “letters of concern (<https://make-the-shift.org/resources/letters-of-concern/>)” to governments and private entities to detail alleged violations of the human right to housing.

The group has written to the government of Canada about protecting people living in homelessness, to officials in Nova Scotia about using police to clear encampments, and to officials in England regarding tenants forced to leave a housing estate (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-leeds-64289859>).

“International human-rights experts are paying attention to 76 Place and what's happening in Philly,” said Neeta Patel, interim executive director of Asian Americans United in Philadelphia (<https://aaunited.org/>), “because this predatory business model and the developers behind it ... violate our fundamental rights.”

The Shift, Freeman said, was “keenly aware of the damage that other downtown arenas have done to communities of color in the U.S. and felt it extremely important to help prevent a similar outcome potentially occurring in Philadelphia's Chinatown.”

In its letter, The Shift cited sources of information that included direct conversations with Chinatown residents and backers, news reports, academic studies, neighborhood profiles, historic analyses, and United Nations findings and documents.

The right to housing, the organization said, means the right to live in peace, security and dignity.

“It is clear that 76 Place poses a serious risk to Philadelphia’s Chinatown, putting the health and well-being of the community in jeopardy, likely leading to significant levels of displacement due to gentrification, and threatening livelihoods and cultural lives,” The Shift said in its letter. “Any potential positive effects that might be derived from the arena development can never justify these outcomes.”

The team has other choices besides building on the edge of Chinatown, the group wrote, including finding an alternate site or remaining at its current home, the Wells Fargo Center in South Philadelphia.

The Sixers describe the proposed arena as a huge, tax-generating win for the city (<https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/inq2/sixers-arena-proposal-philadelphia-venue-need-chinatown-development-20230315.html>), one that would create jobs and drive spending and foot traffic on downtrodden East Market Street. Placing the arena atop the transit hub of Jefferson Station would encourage fans to take public transportation (<https://www.inquirer.com/real-estate/76ers-new-arena-chinatown-parking-capacity-20230615.html>), the team said.

Last month the Sixers announced they would build a \$250 million, 20-floor residential tower on top of the arena, raising the value of the project from \$1.3 billion to \$1.55 billion (<https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/sixers->

arena-virtual-forums-community-chinatown-20230816.html). The Sixers say they would designate 20% of the 395 units as affordable housing, to be rented at below-market rates.

The arena would rise on the footprint from 10th to 11th and Market to Filbert Streets, claiming one-third of the Fashion District mall and the now empty Greyhound bus station

(<https://www.inquirer.com/transportation/greyhound-bus-stop-market-street-philadelphia-20230706.html>). The northern end of the arena would abut Chinatown at Cuthbert Street.

The team says it will seek no city dollars for the project. It plans to move from the Wells Fargo Center when its lease expires in 2031.

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