





FORUM Another sign of JP gentrifying?

McCready said, when asked whether outcry from some residents could cause Whole Foods to pull back on plans to move into JP, "I think the facts sort of stand as they are for us," before later adding, "Our lease is signed and we have access to the building starting in late March."

Whole Foods did not send representatives to the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council-hosted forum, which filled the John F. Kennedy Elementary School auditorium and was preceded by an hour-long rally in the school's adjacent gymnasium that packed with opponents of the organic chain's plans.

But, opponents remained optimistic that they could stop the national supermarket before it fully moves into the space that had been occupied by Latino-specialty grocer Hi-Lo Foods for the past four decades.

"We believe that if Whole Foods feels enough community opposition, they could pull back," said Christy Pardew, spokeswoman for a newly-formed, all-volunteer grassroots opposition group, the **Whose Foods / Whose Community Coalition**. "I feel very optimistic. There's a lot of good energy and community feedback."

"There's no doubt for us that Whole Foods in Hyde Square will mean gentrification and the displacement of low- and moderate-income families," she said, before adding "I think it is a symptom of what's been happening in JP. But it is an important struggle for what's been going on in Hyde Square. [The former Hi-Lo store] is one of the largest commercial spaces in the most diverse part of the neighborhood."

The Whose Foods coalition, comprised of around 30 core members and a growing number of supporters since forming in early February, said their group is not anti-Whole Foods, but rather pro-diversity, pro-locally owned and pro-affordability. They said they are afraid their **neighborhood's diversity**, affordability and a strong sense of community despite racial and socio-economic differences will be altered, if not lost altogether, should a large national company like Whole Foods open a store in JP.

More than a dozen residents spoke at the forum in-favor of a Whole Foods in JP, while around twice as many spoke against the idea. Several speakers from each side of the argument expressed mixed emotions.

Whole Foods supporters acknowledged being significantly less organized and outnumbered at the meeting, but they also raised that fact repeatedly as justification for why the opposition has seemed more vocal in comparison.

Some said residents in-favor of a Whole Foods appear to be smaller in numbers because they are afraid to attend or speak aloud at public forums where the crowd majority is unified against the store -- and, likewise, against anyone who might express support for it. But, supporters wondered aloud whether a survey of every neighborhood resident, outside of a public forum setting, would create a different perception of how many in JP are for and against the store.

Tension and frustration were apparent from both sides, prompting heated commentary at times from some speakers amid a mixture of cheering, clapping, booing, hissing and muffled comments from a crowd told during opening remarks to refrain from making noise.

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That divisiveness became a separate topic that some addressed as “shameful” during their two-minute allotments with the microphone. Speakers worried that commonly-adored traits of both sides – JP’s connectedness, inclusiveness and sense of community – were being strained, if not broken, by the debate over Whole Foods.

“It was a little disheartening to see how divisive people were tonight,” said City Councilor Matt O’Malley in an interview at the closure of the meeting attended by several other local elected officials. “At times it took an inappropriate turn. I would hate to see this debate continue on this course.”

The two-hour-long back-and-forth of around 40 speakers included attacks that some felt were ignorant or wrongly targeting class, race or ethnic differences. However, others pointed out that in spite of those remarks, each side in the debate over Whole Foods had a mix of residents from varying class, race and ethnic backgrounds.

“There is a diversity of opinion out there,” said State Rep. Jeffrey Sánchez in an interview. “It’s a symbol,” he added referring to Hi-Lo’s departure and Whole Foods moving in. “People get extremely emotional about symbols.”

Other arguments and concerns speakers presented against Whole Foods’ plans included: worries that the company is dishonest and does not always practice what it claims to be, the company is too large, won’t live up to its promises to the community and that the corporation cares only about its bottom line; that an upscale store like Whole Foods would increase JP’s housing and general living costs forcing out low- and moderate income families and causing a wealthier, more homogeneous mix of residents to move in -- referred to by some analysts in recent years as “the Whole Foods effect”; food would be less affordable; a locally-owned business would be better for JP, especially for low- and moderate-income residents than Whole Foods; and traffic would worsen in Hyde Square.

Supporters countered that: Whole Foods is a private business and shouldn’t be expected to stop from acting on a completed, legal, private business transaction; gentrification is nothing new to JP and is happening with or without Whole Foods; Hi-Lo was “dirty” and not a good employer or neighborhood partner, but Whole Foods will be cleaner and a better employer and community partner; and that the economy is bad and there is a high number of empty storefronts in Hyde Square already – stopping Whole Foods would just add one more large vacancy instead of capitalizing on an opportunity to bring jobs, business and revenue from outside shoppers into the neighborhood.

“We’re listening, and we are hearing both sides” in the neighborhood’s debate over Whole Foods’ future opening, said Whole Foods’ spokeswoman in a phone interview before the forum. “As we’ve said before, we have a long history of being a very productive and positive member of communities we serve.”

After the renovation process begins and Whole Foods has a better idea of its timeline for opening, she said the company plans to host community-wide meetings at which “we will be happy to address any questions the community has.”

Addressing questions posed [online](#) and at the forum about the Whole Foods coalition’s financial situation, the group’s spokeswoman said Tuesday, “We haven’t received, or asked for, any monetary donations [or any non-financial endorsements], and no one is being compensated for their work with the

coalition."

She did not know an exact total of how much has been spent to support the group thus far, but said it is likely under \$50, possibly less than \$30 and all through out-of-pocket volunteer funds. The group's website cost around \$15 to register and was developed by a volunteer; phone banking was done using volunteers' cell phones, and handout photocopies have either been made through in-kind donations or using out-of-pocket funds, the spokeswoman said.

The JPNC's Chair Andrea Howley said the top issue resident speakers addressed on Feb. 8 at the first community meeting on Whole Foods were concerns over the loss of Latino food, culture and overall community diversity due to Hi-Lo's departure.

She announced Monday that the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Council is actively seeking a Latino grocer to fill available property on its Blessed Sacrament campus in Hyde Square.

Howley reiterated at the beginning of the forum that the council has not yet taken a position on the Whole Foods debate.

"We are definitely a community divided," she said.

The next council meeting on Whole Foods will be at 7 p.m. Mar. 8 at the First Baptist Church on Centre Street.

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Inside the packed auditorium, crowd members were asked to wave their hands silently in lieu of applause interruptions. Some who attended the rally beforehand also waved blue informational sheets given out then.

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