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JAMAICA PLAIN

# JP Neighborhood Council passes, by one vote, to oppose Whole Foods

Posted by Matt Rocheleau March 9, 2011 01:02 AM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

After lengthy deliberation, the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council passed, by a one-vote margin, a measure to publicly oppose a Whole Foods store slated to move into Hyde Square.

On Wednesday, [the supermarket company responded](#) that it is "disappointed" by the council's vote. But Whole Foods, which now holds keys to the commercial space, said it is also "encouraged that it was such a close vote" and "appreciative" of support it has received in the wake of the council's decision.

The [20-member council](#), designed to represent neighborhood residents on public issues including development, took an official stance for the first time Tuesday evening on a controversial issue that has divided JP residents since mid-January when the national grocer [announced its intentions](#).

The council's stance has no direct impact on Whole Foods' plans. But it is a symbol of opposition and also an indicator of future hurdles Whole Foods may face if the company winds up needing additional city licensing or other approval to open. The council, a volunteer, biennially-elected advisory group, would take a separate vote on such matters and pass a majority recommendation to city officials who make the final call to approve or deny requests.

Of the 17 council members present at the special meeting, nine voted in favor of a motion proposed by member Jesse White to form and publicize a statement opposing Whole Foods' plans.

"Based on what we know now, we are concerned that Whole Foods is not a good fit for Hyde Square," the statement says, in part. "We hope that it will reconsider its decision to move into the neighborhood, and we hope that our community can work together to find an alternative to Whole Foods that will strengthen Jamaica Plain's culture of diversity, locally owned businesses, and welcome to people of all economic status."

(See the entire JPNC statement below this story)

The move comes less than three weeks before the company will gain access to a large Centre Street commercial space that had been occupied by Latino-

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specialty grocer Hi-Lo Foods for over four decades.

"[The Whole Foods store] is an as-of-right move," said Rep. Jeffrey Sánchez by phone Wednesday morning. "I'm curious to see the council's next steps. Where do they go from here? ... I've never heard or seen the neighborhood council take a stand against a business coming in without [the council] having an application before it."

He said that though he does not believe potential businesses are discouraged to move into JP at this point, "there has to be a sense within all of us that we keep an eye on the business district, it's the backbone of the community .. There are opportunities for business here and we are a welcoming community despite this."

The council hosted two **well-attended public forums** in recent weeks to hear residents' concerns about Hi-Lo's closure and Whole Foods' impending arrival. Tuesday night's meeting was a public event, but discussion was only allowed by council members.

The overwhelming sentiment from residents attending each forum has been opposed to the Texas-based supermarket chain. The opposition contingent has become **increasingly organized**, including the formation of a **grassroots coalition**.

Whole Foods' supporters have acknowledged their contingent has been outnumbered at meetings. But some said they appear to be smaller in numbers because they are afraid to attend or speak at events where the majority is unified against the store and its supporters. They added that some who feel Whole Foods' arrival is a guarantee may be less motivated to voice support.

Sánchez said while there's been a strong opposition at community meetings, he's seen a strong virtual community in favor of a Whole Foods.

"With technology, now there's a lot more discussion," about such issues, he said, adding that he does not think the community is "divided" in ways that are impacting residents beyond the Whole Foods issue.

"Of course people get emotional with each other about it, but that won't stop what else is going on in the neighborhood ... JP has always been a vocal community. It's in the normal flow of community dialogue here," Sánchez said.

"We definitely recognize the community is divided," said council chair Andrea Howley as Tuesday's meeting at First Baptist Church began. "We're probably going to find a council divided as well."

After proposing the motion passed over an hour later at Tuesday's deliberation, council member White said that, "Whole Foods is not the beginning of gentrification in Jamaica Plain. But, with its size and with its scope, it very well could result in the final homogenization of this community."

Fellow member, Francesca Fordiani agreed.

"The neighborhood council has a long history of resisting gentrification ... Just because [gentrification] has been happening, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't be resisting it. And that we have to let it happen, and let it happen at a faster pace. And, I do believe that will happen if Whole Foods comes to Hyde Square."

White said the council should pressure the property's owner, Newton-based

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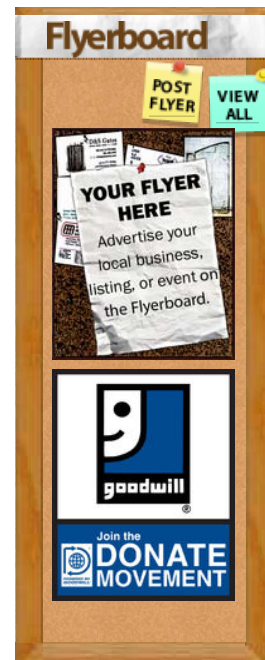


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Knapp Foods, Inc., to find another business to fill the space that formerly housed Hi-Lo, which Knapp Foods operated.

She said a decision was needed now, or else, “the train will move forward without us,” referring to the council.

Others were dismayed at the idea that the JPNC should form an official opinion now, including Jesse Abair who called it “irresponsible.”

“Why the rush to say that we’re ‘convinced’ ... We haven’t actually had any interaction with Whole Foods,” said member David Baron. “It’s not like the bulldozers are on Centre Street, yet. There’s still time.”

Also reluctant for the council to take a stance, Jay Zoldak said, that as a neighborhood property owner, he was “concerned on both sides of the ‘Whole Foods effect’” – that its arrival increasing property values could either benefit his investment or could force him to move out if the value increase becomes unaffordable.

Member Edward J. “Red” Burrows said the national grocer has not reached out enough to the community. If the council allows, without protest, a company to proceed in such a manner would it not set a good example for future neighborhood development, he said.

“Do I trust Whole Foods? Not a hell of a lot,” he said. “I think we should be struggling to say ‘no’ to them because they haven’t done anything for me to say ‘yes.’ They’ve done the direct opposite.”

“They’ve had back-room, closed-door deals, not talking to this community,” continued Burrows. “The only time this community has had a dialogue is when we decided to push it out there.”

“This is the biggest fight Hyde Square is probably ever going to face in the near future,” he said later. “We cannot abandon the people who worked so hard to build a community to make Whole Foods want to build in their community now.”

Other council members supporting the motion cited that while the neighborhood has seemed divided, the passion and conviction of those opposed has been stronger than residents who have expressed support for the incoming supermarket.

Arguments expressed by some on the council against a Whole Foods included: the company is not local; its store may force smaller area competitors to close, thus nullifying the store’s potential job-creation; adverse traffic impacts; business vacancies in Hyde Square are a result of landlords hiking rent and nearby empty storefronts should not be seen as foreshadowing what may happen if Whole Foods backs out of plans to move in.

Others voice favor for a Whole Foods.

Dave Demerjian, despite listing several drawbacks he saw, said that if Whole Foods backs out, it will leave a large, important commercial space empty that would make the area less appealing to other businesses and consumers, which could lead to more empty Hyde Square storefronts.

“It’s not a scenario that should be dismissed,” he said, adding that the neighborhood “cannot afford to wait,” for another business to move in.

At last community meeting’s closure, Demerjian recalled a resident saying, “‘Be careful what you wish for.’ And, I think the opposition [to a Whole Foods]

should take that to heart.”

Some worried others on the council, who said they feel disrespected by Whole Foods, may be being swayed against the supermarket’s plans out of a personal feeling of being slighted because the company has not sought the council’s approval or input on its plans yet.

Members also discussed how taking a stance now may affect future decisions that could come before the council, including how its stance may weigh on the council’s perceived objective value in making recommendations should Whole Foods need some city approval.

Related to discussions over how much value the council’s stance may have was an exchange between council chair Howley and member White.

“Do you think they don’t know we’re in opposition about this,” Howley asked.

“Publicly, we [the JPNC] haven’t spoken, yet,” White replied.

“This speaks volumes more than we do,” said Howley pointing to an audience packed with opponents to the store who were identifiable by the blue flyers they waved that had been handed out by members of the recently-formed grassroots opposition group.

The council later voted 15-0, with two members abstaining, to approve the future formation of an ad hoc committee that will explore its next steps in regards to "the general issue of Whole Foods" moving in and report back to the council.

Council member Michael Reiskind, a member of the neighborhood’s historical society, provided research he had conducted about past similar controversies of private food establishments attempting to open shop in JP.

There were failed attempts by the Dominos pizza chain – shot down twice in Forest Hills by residents before proposals ever reached a community or zoning process and later plans to move into a Centre Street space were denied by two neighborhood associations, he said.

And, there was the public refusal of a D’Angelo sub shop in the neighborhood’s center. That space was significantly smaller than where Whole Foods currently has a signed lease, and the neighborhood’s sentiment toward D’Angelo was opposed by nearly all JP residents, whereas the sentiment toward a Whole Foods appears to be split. However, he said, that national chain did have a lease signed when it decided to back out.

Somewhat ironically, around when the JPNC formed about two decades ago, Reiskind said a primary effort of the council, along with other mainstay neighborhood volunteer groups and nonprofits, was to encourage investment in JP and to bring in new business.

“It’s hard, once that success is reached, to try to go back and try to stop gentrification,” he said, adding that the only victorious attempt he is aware of to reverse, or at least dramatically slow, that process is in a section of Houston, Texas. “You need some very innovative ideas.”

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**After agreeing to amend wording – “we are convinced” to “we are concerned” and “after listening to arguments on all sides” to “based on what we now know” – and agreeing to remove the words “newly vacant” before “property at 415 Centre Street,” the neighborhood council passed the release of the following statement on Whole**

**Foods' plans:**

“As a Council, we have committed ourselves to preserving affordable housing through our residential use policies, and have consistently expressed concern in our zoning and public licensing decisions to preserve the rich character of Jamaica Plain. We therefore commit ourselves to working with the established business community, community organizations and public officials to explore alternative uses of the property at 415 Centre Street. Based on what we know now, we are concerned that Whole Foods is not a good fit for Hyde Square. We hope that it will reconsider its decision to move into the neighborhood, and we hope that our community can work together to find an alternative to Whole Foods that will strengthen Jamaica Plain's culture of diversity, locally owned businesses, and welcome to people of all economic status.”

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

From left to right with hands raised: Jay Zoldak (Area A); David Baron (Area B); Karley Ausiello (Area C); Dave Demerjian (Area A); Michael Reiskind (At-large); Andrea Howley (Chair and Area C); Stephen Lussier (Area C); and Jesse Abair (Area A) voted against the motion to issue a statement opposing Whole Foods' arrival.

From left to right with hands not raised: Edward J. "Red" Burrows (Area C); Steve Laferriere (not pictured, Area B); Francesca Fordiani (At-large); Ben Knappmiller (At-large); Pamela Bender (At-large); Orion Kriegman; Steven Backman (Area B); and Jesse White (Area B); and Emily Wheelwright (not pictured, Area B) voted for a council statement opposing Whole Foods.

Members Jeremy Harold (Area C); Daniel Perez Lacera (At-large); and Peggy O'Connor (Area A) were not present Tuesday evening.

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