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JAMAICA PLAIN

Some once-foes in JP's Whole Foods debate now working together

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

As Whole Foods prepares to meet face-to-face with the neighborhood for the first time since announcing its Hyde Square plans four months ago, some rivals in the community debate are putting aside differences and turning their attention toward finding common ground.

"I really don't have any doubt that if Whole Foods does come in, they will be met by a pretty united community," said Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council member Jesse White, who authored a [public statement](#) the council narrowly voted to issue two months ago declaring "Whole Foods is not a good fit for Hyde Square."

There are still residents and grass-root groups from both the pro- and anti-Whole Foods store sides of the debate who remain staunchly committed to the stance they took in [late January](#), and determining a majority sentiment among Jamaica Plain's 37,000 residents remains as indefinable as it has been since the debate began.

However, some key examples of residents now trying to work with, after [months of working against](#), one another may be an early indication that the subject is shifting from food fight to potluck.

"I think it's just starting now," said At-large City Councilor Felix G. Arroyo, who penned a [letter](#) recently that many of those once-foes felt reflected how they feel about the issue. "Not everyone is there yet, but I think most people in Jamaica Plain are."

"What I'm hoping to do is bring folks who oppose the Whole Foods, folks who have reservations about the Whole Foods and those who are for the Whole Foods to find common ground and work together on this important issue," he added.

District 6 City Councilor Matt O'Malley said he also hopes for a united community effort when Whole Foods officials meet with the neighborhood [June 2](#) and in discussions beyond.

"I recognize and respect people who have differing opinions on this. But I'm hopeful there can be some common ground going forward," he said. "We're too strong of a neighborhood to let something like this become as divisive as it

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has. There are so many more pressing and urgent problems in JP that we should be working on."

Some say the growing sense of accord has come from a realization among those opposing the store that Whole Foods is not going to reverse its plans to open in JP. Some contend that those favoring the store are now more willing to request the supermarket company address neighbors' various concerns. Others say they are simply tired of arguing with fellow residents.

They all say they're uniting over common values – namely their passion for creating the best-possible Jamaica Plain, even if their ideas for what's best are conflicting. Those moving toward a more unified approach feel meeting Whole Foods at the table in such a manner will bring about more productive conversations.

"My reservations about Whole Foods haven't really changed at this point, but I do hope people can come together for some sort of benefits agreement," said White. "In the groups I'm working with around this issue, I've sensed people from all sides and all opinions working together. It does feel to me like people are really starting to come together on this."

Juliette Hannan has co-owned Fat Ram's Tattoo in Hyde Square for a decade, and she remembered when she first learned of Whole Foods' plans.

"I was thrilled. We're really excited for Whole Foods to come and attract new businesses to Hyde Square," she said. "I love the healthy food options as well. I'm definitely one of the pro-Whole Foods people."

She said she has signed a petition supporting the store's opening and has been active in online discussion boards trying to argue her points.

"I had a couple of nice experiences where we started off debating from totally different sides and then eventually found common ground and on some things agreeing to disagree," said Hannan, who lived in JP for 10 years before moving to Roslindale five years ago. "We have fundamental disagreements about what Whole Foods coming here will do to our community, but we were able to find agreement about our passion for the community."

The petition Hannan signed was created by JP for All, a key grass-root group that sprouted to support the store in the wake of opposition groups forming, namely Whose Foods.

Five-year neighborhood resident Rick Stockwood created JP for All and its petition.

"There is support [for the store], but [supporters] do have concerns, and we hope Whole Foods will address them," he said.

"We are hopeful that the tenor and the tone has simmered to a point where we can agree to disagree," he added, recalling how long the debate has carried on: "we started this conversation in snow boots ... I hope this saga becomes a non-saga."

But, there are individuals from both sides who remain committed to strong stances either favoring or opposing the new store.

The Whose Foods coalition has been the main organized opposition to the new store. The group maintains the outcome it would most like to see is that Whole Foods not open in Jamaica Plain.

"I think there have been some grumblings of people hoping to come together

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and unite around a community benefits agreement, and I think this next meeting [on June 2] will be the litmus test for that," said spokeswoman Jen Kiok.

The Whose Foods coalition would only support a strong community benefits agreement, she said and that it must include the type of affordable housing preservation fund that Sen. Sonia Chang-Diaz outlined in a recent [letter](#).

Kiok said the group feels Whole Foods has missed opportunities to be a good community partner by having not met in-person with residents or having more open communication with the neighborhood.

And, the group said in a statement that it indentified more with Sen. Chang-Diaz's letter than Councilor Arroyo's: "We encourage Councilor Arroyo to extend his proposals to include measures that would prevent the further displacement of low and moderate income residents from Hyde Square, including seeking alternatives for the Hi-Lo space."

Meanwhile, the debate "has turned our neighborhood inside out over the past four months," she said.

She added that the public letters from the company's executives have "brushed aside, if not, ignored the community's concerns."

Martha Rodriguez, a 13-year JP resident who has lived in Hyde Square for the past three, is a single mother raising a 5-year-old and a 2-year-old son. She has volunteered with the Whose Foods coalition and remains committed to opposing the store.

But she noted, "I wish it wasn't like this. I know it's a controversial topic and people want different things. It's tough to see the neighborhood divided like that ... It takes a toll on you emotionally."

Norma Rey-Alicea grew up in Jamaica Plain and now owns a home in the neighborhood. For some time, she worked with the Whose Foods campaign, including as a spokeswoman. But, she said, like many in the debate, her thoughts, feelings and priorities on the issue have evolved.

"I'm still very much personally opposed to a Whole Foods in Jamaica Plain, and I always will be. But, if it opens, we need to get a good CBA [community benefits agreement] out of it," she said. "I don't want them to open anyway and have us miss the boat."

"This debate hasn't created the heavy issues we're talking about now, it's surfaced them," she continued. "And, that's not a bad thing ... The only reason we're all up in arms is because we love the neighborhood."

Hundreds of neighborhood residents have signed petitions expressing strong support or opposition to Whole Foods and a large number have heatedly debated the issue at community meetings, in online discussion boards and on the radio.

However, Stockwood pointed out: "there are some 35,000 JP residents at least who haven't gotten passionately involved in the debate. They've gone to work in the morning, gone home at night and pretty much ignored the whole thing."

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