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Police arrest 3, abruptly end Whole Foods' first meeting with Jamaica Plain residents

Posted by Matt Rocheleau June 3, 2011 03:00 AM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

This banner, hung from an area police said was off-limits to audience members, led to the arrest of the two people who unveiled it during the meeting. A similar banner led to the arrest of another resident who tried to display his banner in the middle of the main seating area.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

The heated debate over Whole Foods' plans to move in to Jamaica Plain reached an unprecedented peak Thursday night when three people were arrested at a community meeting, prompting police to end the forum nearly a half-hour earlier than planned.

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It was the first time Whole Foods officials met face-to-face with the neighborhood that has been divided over the issue -- despite some more recent signs of unity -- since plans for a store in Hyde Square were first announced nearly five months ago.

The crowd of more than 300 listened to

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company executives calmly at the start before repeated outbursts began. Neighbors shouted down one another and Whole Foods officials alike, at times with name-calling and personal attacks.

Opponents to the national grocer's arrival donned light blue T-shirts reading "I support an affordable and diverse JP" and waved blue-colored flyers passed out by leaders of the **Whose Foods** grassroots group beforehand. **Supporters** of the Whole Foods store countered with yellow-colored flyers.

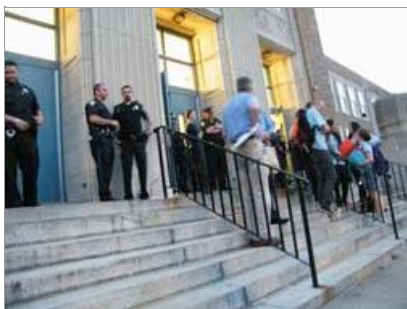
Several police officers on detail were active from the meeting's start, ushering all attendees standing in the aisles to find a seat in packed the auditorium at the Curley K-8 School, a few blocks from where Whole Foods plans to open a store in late fall, replacing the former Hi-Lo Foods.

The Latino-specialty grocer closed after four decades when its owners, Newton-based Knapp Foods, leased the building to Whole Foods.

After hanging an anti-Whole Foods banner that said: "Displacement: What is Whole Foods going to do about it?" from a balcony seating area, two attendees and neighborhood residents, Chloe Frankel, 27, and Andrew Murray, 22, were arrested.

The banner unveiling led to an eruption of chants against the supermarket company's intentions and dozens of others then headed for the exits in apparent disgust. On their way out, some stopped to shake the hands of Whole Foods representatives who sat facing the crowd in a row of chairs set up at the front of the auditorium.

Police said the balcony area had been cordoned off and people were advised specifically not to venture up there. Boston police spokesman Officer Eddy Chrispin said that when police then asked the duo to leave the building, they refused to cooperate and were arrested on charges of disrupting a public assembly and trespassing.



(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

More police arrived to disperse the forum.

Later, another activist attempted to hold up a second banner in the middle of the auditorium's main seating area. The sign was not fully unveiled, but activists later said it read "One meeting is not enough." After a brief tug-of-war between several audience members and police officers, who attempted to confiscate the banner, Peter Blaiklock, 49, of Jamaica Plain was arrested on a charge of disrupting a public assembly.

Several moments later, police shut down the meeting as around one dozen officers stood outside the school's front entrance to help disperse the crowd. Several cruisers lined Centre Street with their lights flashing.

"Ultimately officers deemed it appropriate to discontinue the meeting concerned about the ability to maintain a peaceful environment for the safety of all in attendance," police said in a [statement Friday](#).

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A small group of residents then journeyed to the District E-13 police station and marched in a circular pattern on the sidewalk outside to protest the arrests. The three arrested at the forum were released one after the other to applause, hugs and megaphone chants around two hours after the meeting had been cut short. Each of those arrested will later be summonsed to West Roxbury District Court, police said.

When asked if she felt she did anything to warrant her arrest, Frankel said: "Of course not."

"We were just exercising our right to free speech," she continued.

Blailock declined to comment on the specifics of his arrest other than confirming he was charged and saying he felt the meeting was productive overall. Murray declined to comment.

Each of the arrestees wore one of the light-blue T-shirts handed out by the Whose Foods group before the meeting.

"It was unfortunate that the meeting had to end the way it did," said Whole Foods spokeswoman Heather McCready by phone after the meeting ended. "We thought there was a good, healthy dialogue going on," but also noted that police said they felt there was sufficient safety concern to abruptly empty the auditorium.

The spokeswoman said the company plans to meet with the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council (JPNC), which in early March [passed, by one vote](#), a measure to publicly oppose Whole Foods' plans and shortly thereafter formed an ad hoc committee to explore the issue.

"We received a lot of information and feedback that we plan to closely consider," she added.

The JPNC ad-hoc committee is expected to issue a report along with recommendations that are expected to include asking Whole Foods to sign a community benefits agreement. McCready said the company would need to first see and review such a potential agreement before commenting on the matter.

As the auditorium was being vacated, Helen Matthews, a spokeswoman for the Whose Foods group, said the presentation by Whole Foods officials was underwhelming, and of the arrests: "I'm in shock ... There never was any intention for anything illegal to be done, and nothing illegal was done."

Whose Foods member Martha Rodriguez, a 25-year-old Jamaica Plain resident of 14 years, waited outside the District E-13 police station with her 5-year-old son, Abraham.

"I knew there was a lot of tension in the neighborhood over this issue, but I never expected this kind intensity," said Rodriguez, one of several residents who had a chance to speak before the meeting ended. "It wasn't fair. They were just holding signs ... I think the police were a little too aggressive and defensive."

On the school's front steps moments after the forum had been shut down, District 6 Councilor Matt O'Malley expressed dismay at the way the crowd interrupted one another and said he was surprised there were arrests.

"It's certainly been a contentious issue," he said, but also noted that there were also moments in between when the crowd was respectful and listened to one another: "I hope for more of that the next time we meet over this issue. I

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still feel people can come together to find some common ground here.”

Standing beside O'Malley, another attendee, Susan, said she's lived in the neighborhood for 35 years and was taken aback at how the meeting went and ended.

“I've never seen anything like this at any community meeting in Jamaica Plain,” she said, noting that while the discussions grew chaotic at times, “there was nothing dangerous or violent that happened.”

On Friday, [JP for All](#), a grassroots group that supports Whole Foods' plans for JP released this statement: "There were a great number of us in the room tonight that were excited to hear that issues such as parking, traffic, public transportation, after-hours parking, providing healthy foods to children, and product availability are being addressed by Whole Foods. It's unfortunate that a community meeting designed to address neighborhood concerns and solutions to address those concerns was hijacked by a group of people who have no other plan than to cause a distraction. We look forward to hearing more about Whole Foods plans and how we can work together to build a long-term partnership that will benefit Hyde Square and Jamaica Plain."

Before the forum was dismissed, Whole Foods officials had presented the company's general vision and practices and introduced some of the JP store's management. Each audience member was welcomed with a reusable shopping bag placed on each seat that contained informational flyers, a copy of the company's spring magazine and post cards for residents to provide the company with product suggestions for the Hyde Square store.

Residents then lined up behind microphones set up in the two different aisles and spoke both in opposition and support – with frequent interruptions from fellow crowd members. Comments were directed to company representatives both in support and opposition to the store's plans.

Some asked why Whole Foods had not held such a meeting sooner with the community. Company officials said that news of their impending arrival broke sooner than they had anticipated and before a lease had been signed.

After the 20-year lease was inked and their plans for a store were confirmed through an announcement, officials explained that the company followed its usual protocol for store openings by waiting until store management and other concrete details about the supermarket were finalized before meeting directly with the neighborhood.

Whole Foods also addressed traffic and parking related concerns saying that while the store and its parking lot are both relatively small, they have secured 20 additional overflow parking spaces at a lot at the adjacent MSPCA-Angell headquarters.

Once the store has a chance to gauge its sales volume, it may allow its parking lot to be shared by area business during non-peak hours and when the store's closed.

The company said the store's location makes it particularly appealing for both shoppers and workers who can walk, bike or take public-transit there. Additionally, the store will offer home delivery service.

While officials said the Centre Street building's interior will be overhauled, the building's exterior will remain almost entirely the same as it looks now, with the exception of installing Whole Foods' name and logo, which will be displayed across a set of non-contiguous rectangular signs reminiscent of the

former Hi-Lo.

To see video shot by JP Patch of the tug-of-war between police and crowd members, [click here](#). To see other clips from the event shot by local blog Universal Hub, [click here and scroll through](#). To watch a clip shot by the Boston Bulletin of the protest outside the District E-13 police station, [click here](#). And, to see a segment from Fox 25 WFXT Boston, [click here](#).

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

One of the three arrestees addressed his supporters who protested outside the District E-13 police station as they awaited his, and two others', release.

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