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Roxbury hardware store sells land after 71-year run, ties to FBI probe

Posted by Matt Rocheleau August 8, 2011 04:37 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

The Harrison Supply Co. store's property on Harrison Avenue was sold in recent weeks. The new owner hopes to either sell, lease or develop the 1.3-acre commercial site near Dudley Square.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A 1.3-acre piece of Roxbury land, where a family-owned hardware store had operated for 71 years, has been sold to a another owner who hopes to either sell, develop or lease the property.

Harrison Supply Co. Inc. closed its 46,000 square-foot warehouse and retail center near Dudley Square in December 2009, in part, the owner said, because of ties to FBI investigations that led to the recent federal imprisonment of former state Senator Dianne Wilkerson on bribery charges.

In late July, Harrison Building LLC, which has no affiliation to the supply company, acquired the property. The land and building are assessed by the city at a combined \$2.6 million. The new owners have since [listed the commercial site for sale](#) available for "immediate" occupancy with a \$2.9-million asking price.

A business partner of Harrison Building, which Medford contracting company

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owner Filippo D'Amato formed in January, said there were no immediate plans for the parcel.

"We're just sort of evaluating which direction to go in," the business partner, Joshua Davidson, said by phone Monday. He added that the options being considered are to sell, lease, or develop the property.

The site, along Harrison Avenue near its intersection with Melnea Cass Boulevard, is near to [several proposed major developments](#) and also in an area where Walmart has been eyeing property to build its first store in Boston, according to a recent [Boston Business Journal report](#).

Davidson said the property's new owners have had no discussions with Walmart or other real estate and development entities that have reportedly been working with the mega retailer to find space in Boston.

During its [heyday in the mid-1900s](#), Harrison Supply boasted more than 40 employees and was one of the largest plumbing and heating distributors in New England.

The store's owner, Christopher Marrano, whose stepfather Meyer Michael Shapiro founded Harrison Supply in 1938, said the wholesale-and-retail business had been struggling for years. For some time, there had been consideration of selling the property in order to move to a smaller, less-costly space.

"We held on for too long," he said.

Around a year-and-a-half ago, the hardware center was forced to lay off its six remaining employees and shutter.

Marrano, who inherited the company in 2002, said the business had been facing increased competition from other hardware stores opening nearby, especially from larger chain retailers like Home Depot.

"They got stronger, and we got weaker," he said, adding that the recession likely also played a role.

And, while it may have been headed toward eventual closure or downsizing any way, the business' ties to the FBI investigation of Wilkerson's alleged corruption "was a big part of," why Harrison Supply ultimately shut down when it did, the company president said.

Around one decade ago, the hardware company began planning a [\\$100-million retail and medical complex](#) to spread across its current property and onto an acre of adjacent land known as Parcel 8; all of the part city and part state owned property remains vacant.

FBI officials said that between 2002 and 2006 Marrano's development partner Azid Mohammed paid several thousand dollars in bribes to Wilkerson, the [Globe reported](#) three years ago. In exchange, the Roxbury resident assured her support for the proposal and that the developers would eventually win control of the public parcel in the legislative district she had represented since 1993.

Mohammed has said he felt pressured by Wilkerson to make those payments and Marrano has said he was unaware of the money allegedly exchanged.

The hardware company's development idea had been given the city redevelopment authority's support some four years before Wilkerson began backing the idea, but the proposal stalled until she advocated on its behalf.

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After undercover FBI agents posing as Atlanta-based developers interested in the parcel's plans allegedly gave a separate \$15,000 in bribes to Wilkerson, she surprised Marrano and Mohammed when she began urging them to team with the new investors.

When the former state senator was arrested in fall 2008, the development plans fell through. Released affidavits then showed the two businessmen why Wilkerson had allegedly demanded they partner with the other investors.

While waiting for access to develop the abutting Parcel 8, Harrison Supply officials had turned down pre-recession opportunities to sell the company's warehouse and retail property. The company had taken out a **\$1.3-million loan** on its seven-decade-old store's home. A little more than one year later, the hardware center closed.

After fighting to avoid foreclosure, Marrano was able to sell the company's property and its mortgage to D'Amato on July 29.

Marrano has been able to salvage some aspects of his old business. In April, he opened Chris' Custom Countertops in a shop one-tenth of the size of his former business facility.

On Eustis Street around the corner from Harrison Supply, Marrano's new company, which focuses on wholesale and retail of countertops, cabinets and appliances, has seen some early success thanks to support from customers of his old, larger business, which had additional departments, including hardware and lumber supplies.

"I'm doing pretty good," Marrano said. "It's been pretty busy so far."

He said his young company has grown since its springtime debut. He employs four full-timers one-part timer. All of his staff are among those who were laid off when the old hardware center closed.

Reached by phone Monday at Harrison Supply, which Marrano hopes to be fully moved out of by September, the former owner said the prime, for-sale property was being toured as he spoke.

Within the past eight months or so, he said "the place has been looked at around 40 to 50 times."

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