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JAMAICA PLAIN

Group opposing store arrival demands Whole Foods sign deal, donate revenue

Posted by Matt Rocheleau September 13, 2011 07:28 PM

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This story was updated Wed., Sept. 14 at 7:30 a.m. to add a statement from Whole Foods Market. For a full story on that statement, [click here](#):

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A group opposing Whole Foods' plans for a new store in Hyde Square demanded Tuesday that the company sign a community benefits agreement with Jamaica Plain and that the deal include a yearly 1 percent donation of the store's annual revenue for the next two decades.

The Whose Foods? Whose Community? Coalition said in a letter Tuesday that a deal must include a yearly 1 percent donation of the store's annual revenue for the duration of Whole Foods' 20-year lease in Jamaica Plain. And, that money should be invested toward anti-displacement and affordable housing, the group says.

The coalition formed in February, one month after Whole Foods plans for a JP store became public, and since then has been the chief organized group opposing the national grocer's arrival to Jamaica Plain.

Whole Foods Market [said in a statement](#) Tuesday evening that it will not establish any sort of fund for the community's use.

"The JPNC recently requested that Whole Foods Market create a fund for use by JP community groups, which is a request that has never been made to any other retailer joining JP," a statement the company e-mailed to Boston.com Tuesday evening said in part. "Creating a fund for a specific community is not how we do business, nor have we ever found it necessary given our history of community involvement. Our outlook at this time has not changed, and we are now focusing 100% of our energy on opening our new store in Jamaica Plain."

Officials from the neighborhood council were not immediately available to comment.

Members of the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council met with Whole Foods officials last week to present a "good neighbor" agreement. However, the company said it was never asked to actually sign that deal, but simply discussed a list of requests and topics.

And, the council said in a statement last week Whole Foods representatives were "unwilling to enter into any formal agreement at this time." However, the council's chair told the Jamaica Plain Gazette this week that she believes a deal with the supermarket company is still possible.

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Whole Foods' statement Tuesday did not directly answer whether the company would consider signing a community benefits deal that does not include a request to create such a fund. And, company officials were not immediately available for further comment Wednesday morning.

"Whole Foods Market has a long history as responsible community partners, not only through our deeply rooted involvement with local programs and committees, but also through our extensive give-back programs," the grocer's statement said.

The company noted that since January, when its signing of a lease and plans to open a store in Hyde Square became public, more than \$36,000 in monetary and food donations has been donated or promised to community groups, schools and nonprofits in Jamaica Plain, "and this is just the beginning of our efforts as we are open to supporting any 501c3 that supports the causes that are important to Jamaica Plain's residents."

In related news and noted in Tuesday's statement, Whole Foods announced last week that seven-year JP resident and Whole Foods employee of six years Jennifer Licht will be the new store's marketing team leader and community liaison when it opens in late fall.

An earlier press release from the company said she will be "responsible for connecting with Jamaica Plain's schools, committees and non-profits. In addition to handling store donations, her responsibilities will also include organizing store tours and hosting events and classes in-store and in the community."

"I love living in JP, and working for Whole Foods Market. The opportunity to blend the two is very exciting to me," Licht, who most recently worked as a healthy eating specialist at the company's Brighton store said in the release. "As a mom and a resident of JP, I appreciate the responsibility that we all share in supporting our neighborhood. I am eager to get started showing people how Whole Foods Market truly cares about our communities and our environment."

Below is a copy of the statement from Whole Foods:

Whole Foods Market has a long history as responsible community partners, not only through our deeply rooted involvement with local programs and committees, but also through our extensive give-back programs. We are committed to having a dedicated community market liaison at each store location whose job is to work with local community groups and non-profit organizations.

Since January, 2011, Whole Foods Market has donated or promised more than \$36,000 in monetary and food donations to JP community groups, schools and non-profit organizations, and this is just the beginning of our efforts as we are open to supporting any 501c3 that supports the causes that are important to Jamaica Plain's residents.

The JPNC recently requested that Whole Foods Market create a fund for use by JP community groups, which is a request that has never been made to any other retailer joining JP. Creating a fund for a specific community is not how we do business, nor have we ever found it necessary given our history of community involvement. Our outlook at this time has not changed, and we are now focusing 100% of our energy on opening our new store in Jamaica Plain.

The Whose Foods? Coalition is deeply disappointed in Whole Foods' dismissal of the Good Neighbor Agreement put forward by the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council (and written with the input of several other organizations) last Wednesday. We were hopeful that a Good Neighbor Agreement would enable Whole Foods to benefit all of JP, the residents who want to shop there and the residents who cannot, those who would benefit from having their property values rise and those who would be pushed out by rent increases.

Whole Foods says it's unwilling to enter into a Good Neighbor Agreement. The Whose Foods? Coalition is unwilling to let Whole Foods walk into our neighborhood without a real commitment to keeping JP affordable and diverse. Demanding that Whole Foods enter an agreement to counteract the negative effects of its opening is common sense. It's asking for a fair shake from a good neighbor who is willing to pull their own weight.

"Good Neighbor" or "Community Benefits" Agreements are not new, or crazy, or outlandish. The Stop & Shop development in Jackson Square involved a Community Benefits Agreement, as did the IKEA in Somerville. A Community Benefits Agreement is based on the principle that companies benefit substantially from the resources built by neighbors in a community. Companies, therefore, should share a part of the wealth they gain from the community.

Even 1% of the annual revenue from Whole Foods' Jamaica Plain store would help prevent the displacement of our neighbors. It would help organizers work towards better policies and against destructive rent-hikes. It would help ensure that there are affordable housing options in our neighborhood. It would help low-income people, many of whom are Latino or African American, be able to stay and enjoy the neighborhood that is home.

We demand this 1% for the funding of local anti-displacement organizing, especially in Hyde Square, and the creation and/or preservation of local affordable housing, annually for the duration of the store's 20-year lease. We demand a small slice of the pie that our neighborhood makes possible. Being a good neighbor means mutuality.

The Whose Foods? Coalition also supports other demands that came out of JP's Neighborhood Council's months-long research on the corporation:

- 1) a living wage (at minimum) for all employees in JP
- 2) a published traffic study prior to opening
- 3) funding for youth programs, food assistance and local business assistance.

Whole Foods told Boston.com that "Definitely a large percentage of the items are things Whole Foods already does." ("Whole Foods Meets with Jamaica Plain to Discuss 'Good Neighbor' Pact") Where's the concrete evidence of the corporation's commitment to a living

wage, its published traffic study, and funding for youth, food access, and local business?

More urgently, where's evidence that Whole Foods is taking seriously the outcry over its impact on property values and displacement, its undeniable role in the negative aspects of urban gentrification, and demands for contributions toward housing accessibility in JP? The corporation came secretly into Hyde Square, the "Latin Quarter", of our neighborhood last winter, and leased a grocery space that was a staple of Latino community. Refusing to offer meaningful contributions that will reduce the threat of displacement, it simply runs local ads in Spanish. Whole Foods, face the issues of gentrification and displacement -- enter a formal community benefits agreement and give 1%.

Whole Foods can absolutely afford to pay its fair share. Whole Foods paid a corporate tax rate of under 10% last year, and generated a windfall profit for its shareholders. It amassed over 9 billion dollars last year via its 300+ stores (touting itself as the "world's largest retailer of natural and organic foods."). The bottom line is this: Whole Foods makes additional profit by passing off the cost of their impact on neighborhoods. This impact includes losing money that would have circulated in local businesses; losing families who get pushed out by rent increases; and losing economic and cultural diversity.

As progressives, as neighbors, and as a community we must demand loudly a binding agreement and 1% for affordable housing in our neighborhood. We must demand a living wage, a public traffic study, and funding for youth, food access and local business. A binding agreement can set an important national precedent for urban communities struggling to maintain affordability and diversity in the face of large corporations shifting their sights from suburbs to cities. We must claim our power as a community, because the future of this story is in our hands.

A fuller version of this statement with a growing list of endorsers is posted at <http://www.whosefoods.org>.

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Benjamin Rey
Andrew Murray

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The Whose Foods? Whose Community? Coalition is a multicultural, multigenerational group of JP residents and allies working together for a better Jamaica Plain. For more information and more community stories visit <http://www.whosefoods.org>.

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