Cambridgeport vs. Speculators

Anti-workfare demonstration at Sheraton Boston, Nov. 3. U.S. Secretary of Labor Marshall was inside speaking to the Governor's Conference on Employment and Training.

The passage, this Fall, of a zoning petition that restricts height, density and use of buildings along two vulnerable Cambridgeport community borders gave a boost to a continuing neighborhood fight against speculation and MIT expansion.

A History of Struggle

Cambridgeport has a long history of struggle against the profiteers, the master planners and insensitive institutions. The defeat of the Inner Belt (a super-highway connector to the SW Corridor) that would have divided our neighborhood in two and displaced 600 families, was accomplished through intensive community organizing less than 10 years ago. Five years ago, a petition squashed plans for high rise luxury development. And the 5-year-old confrontation with MIT over use of the 25-acre former Simplex Wire & Cable Co. property has gained wide publicity.

The Zoning Change–How We Did It

The most recent victory builds on the previous ones. The street that the Inner Belt was supposed to go up is part of the area that just got downzoned. Limiting building heights, density and uses through downzoning discourages speculators who are holding onto property solely for its potential value.

It took nine months for the Cambridgeport Alliance, a grassroots coalition, to develop enough unity in the neighborhood to submit a joint proposal to the City Planning Board. First, the Alliance had to convince neighborhood groups outside the Alliance (including the Community Development Corporation—C.D.C.) that it could be done; that we should start with a very strong, comprehensive proposal so that we had something to negotiate. This was not easy. Their hesitancy came from pessimism (the C.D.C. called it "political pragmatism") and fear of alienating the Central Square businessmen. The strength of a clear mandate from a community-wide referendum and a 250 signature petition turned the disbelievers around.

At this point, we thought our only opposition would come from MIT and the absentee landlords. But, inadvertently, we had drawn the boundaries of our zoning petition so that a few small, labor-intensive industries were severely limited if they ever wanted to expand. This opened "Pandora's Box". The business community put together an organized opposition. Not wanting to discourage the expansion of small, labor-intensive industry at a time when jobs in the neighborhood were scarce, we sat down to compromise. The settlement that was hammered out over six months was only a shade of what our original proposal had been. But the guts were still there, and the business community was made aware of our needs & power.

It took a public display of strength to force the City Council to act on our petition even after the settlement with the businessmen. But But, after 1½ years, we had won.

However, zoning alone will not solve the problem of a working-class community struggling for its very survival. Only poor and working people acting together in a concerted and militant effort, using tools like zoning, can defeat the universities and the speculators.

BOCKIAN LEAVES SEOC
(to become a human development coordinator)

On the theory that all things—but especially social change—begin at home, SEOC director Jon Bockian will be leaving the staff this month to assume full-time care of the child he and his wife are expecting January 1. The Council plans to select a new director before the month is out. (Perhaps this explains Jon's vehemence in opposing the proposed workfare program for unemployed fathers.)

PLANT CLOSINGS CONTINUED

they can dominate—tax and material advantages for management executives, the lowest possible labor costs (wages), and a strong infrastructure (access to transportation and energy). These businesses will abandon their workers and reinvest the money they made through the workers' efforts in another area, another state, or even worse, in another country.

What can be done?

Several states have already adopted or are considering adopting legislation that provides protection against runaway shops. Laws have been passed in Maine and Wisconsin, and in Ohio and Michigan the AFL-CIO, UAW, and a broad base coalition of community groups are backing a major state-wide fight for such protection. While the details vary and each state's problems are somewhat different, the legislation adopted or under consideration includes some or all of the following parts:

1) *Advance Notification*—The employer is required to give up to two years written notice of its decision to relocate or close operations in the community. This section will put an end to sudden closings which can decimate a community overnight.

As part of this advance notification, the employers are required to prepare a comprehensive economic impact statement. This statement gives the employees, the state, the community, the union and the area businesses a clear picture of the impact of the intended closing. This comprehensive statement is needed well in advance if the affected parties are to adequately prepare for the results of the closing.

2) *Technical Assistance*—Once the employers have filed this economic impact statement, a state bureau will a) investigate and encourage alternatives to closure with the company, b) explore with employees and the community alternatives in establishing an employee or community-owned corporation, c) make contracts to do feasibility studies of a worker or community buy-out, and d) assist in securing financing for a worker or community buy-out.

3) *Employee Compensation*—Employers must pay their workers severance pay on a fixed formula. This legislation can be written so it does not supercede better provisions that have been negotiated by many unions. But it does provide uniform minimum benefits to the jobless workers the business has left behind.

4) *Compensation for the Community*—When a plant closes, the whole community is hurt, by higher property taxes, deteriorating services, and further layoffs in local retail and service businesses, as the community's overall income shrinks. A provision in the proposed Ohio legislation begins to deal with this problem. It creates a general fund into which the employers must pay a specified amount. This money will be used to provide emergency tax relief, to make available matching funds for federal job creation programs, and help pay for the expanded social services that the community will need. Employers gain many benefits from the communities in which they operate. It is only fair that they make some effort to lessen the damage that a major move causes.

In the coming months the SEOC will be exploring the possibilities for some kind of legislation on plant closings. If you are interested in working on this kind of drive, give us a call. B.S.M.

The interview with Marty Gopen in the last Newsletter was by Shelia Martin.

LDS IN WORCESTER

Sixty people attended the third hearing on Linked Deposits in Worcester on November 15. Speakers told state treasurer Crane and the hearing panel that state funds ought to be reinvested in local banks which make loans to poor communities for jobs and housing. Currently state funds are invested primarily out-of-state.

Testimony included representatives of the Worcester Community Action Council, Worcester Cooperation Council Inc., the Spanish community, the Worcester Labor Council, and several neighborhood groups from the Great Brook Valley, South Worcester, Vernon Hill, Green Island, and Crompton Park parts of town.

Bob Ross, sociology professor at Clark University, gave eloquent testimony about the need to stop capital export and its devastating effects of neighborhood deterioration. Fair Share local leaders spoke about the need to rebuild our communities, and Paul Houlihan, director of the Framingham CAP and an SEOC member called for a well-funded, public LDS targeted to help depressed areas and industries.

The Massachusetts Bankers' Association, which up til now had been silent on the LDS idea, came out with tentative opposition. They wondered if it wasn't "getting the camel's nose under the tent" to regulate where banks may lend. The panel members assured the bankers the program was voluntary, but the Association spokesman, Gordon Spanger, still had his doubts and thought it would be better to meet social goals with direct appropriations and leave investment decisions alone.

So the positions seem to be shaping up—labor, community groups, housing advocates and social agencies for the LDS, the big banks against.

There will be one more hearing, at Gardner Auditorium in the State House on Wed., January 18, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Once testimony has been heard in Boston, the panel will make its recommendations to treasurer Crane. It will then be up to him to decide whether Massachusetts will have an LDS this year. *J.K.*

PEOPLE'S PLATFORM NEWSLETTER

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