

No Gristedes for Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn

Prominent developer criticized for grocery store demolitions

BY JEFFREY HARMATZ

A new development in Downtown Brooklyn has left many low-income residents in a literal lurch, as they have now found themselves without grocery stores, pharmacies, or laundromats at the hands of what they are calling a duplicitous developer.

John Catsimatidis, a developer who rose to fame as the owner of the Gristedes and is rumored to be planning a run for mayor, is butting heads with local community activism group Families United For Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), who claim that new developments are creating profit at the expense of long-time, low-income residents of the area.

FUREE staged a demonstration in front of one of Catsimatidis' buildings on Myrtle Avenue last week before delivering a petition and the results of a neighborhood study directly to the door of his Manhattan office.

Dozens of angry residents convened in front of one of Catsimatidis' new developments along a block of Myrtle Avenue. Where once stood an Associated Supermarket, a Duane Reade, a Laundromat,

dry-cleaners, and several convenience stores are now a number of half-built and unoccupied residential buildings, along with an unopened community center.

Members of FUREE say they have been trying to work with Catsimatidis and his company, Red Apple Group. Catsimatidis has said that he is in negotiations with two supermarket chains to bring them to Myrtle Avenue within the year, but residents say that it is not soon enough.

FUREE and Red Apple met in the fall to discuss options to replace the services that were lost while the developer searches for new tenants for the building, but plans were never agreed upon. Now neighbors have found themselves with few local options for their daily needs.

"I've been in this neighborhood for 45 years, and it's frightening to see that our community is gone," said Mozella McCadny. "When I look around, I don't recognize the neighborhood. I don't know what I can do."

"This is a very sad moment for New York City," said State Senator Velma-nette Montgomery. "The new developments that are com-



Councilwoman Letitia James speaks at a FUREE-led demonstration against developer John Catsimatidis' development plans for a stretch of Myrtle Avenue in Downtown Brooklyn.

ing to Brooklyn are not being built for the existing community. We need to get rid of the Bloomberg Administration's philosophy of building homes for the rich at the expense of the poor."

Because of the construction boom in Downtown Brooklyn, more and more essential community businesses are being lost, and those residents who are not being driven out of the neighborhoods by increases in rent or eviction are finding it harder and harder to live their life.

Members of FUREE and similar groups have been trying to work with Red Apple and other developers to preserve the neighborhood amenities that are used by the lower-income residents, and while they have had many successes, they have had just as many defeats.

"We spoke to people from the Red Apple Group, and asked them how we fit into their plan," said Cynthia Butts, a long-time resident of the neighborhood and member of FUREE. "He said he wouldn't tear anything on this block down for at least five years, but three months later, everything was gone. He took everything from us. He thinks that he's everybody and that we're nobody, but we do exist."

Discussions between FUREE and Red Apple about a possible shuttle bus to bring senior citizens and handicapped residents to grocery stores during the development process were not fleshed out, leaving neighbors with limited mobility and very few food options.

"There's nowhere to go," said Butts. "The only option for many people is to take a cab or car service, but that can get very expensive, especially on a limited income. We asked for a shuttle bus, and now we're demanding one."

FUREE also claims that Red Apple has not provided the affordable housing that was promised for the site, having said that it will be delayed or moved to another location because of the economic downturn.

The demonstration brought Downtown Brooklyn and Fort Greene neighbors of all ages to the front door of one of Catsimatidis' newest buildings in the area, where elected officials, community residents, and neighbors denounced the construction boom and assert that they

have a place in the neighborhoods that they helped build.

Speaking at the demonstration, Councilwoman Letitia James addressed Catsimatidis directly, saying "Count this as a warning, that if you run for mayor, you're going to have to answer for affordable housing. You're going to

have to tell us how you could tear down an entire city block without any plan for supermarkets or child and senior services."