

Through the mill

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* Officials heckled by noisy protesters at Eagle Square groundbreaking

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PROVIDENCE - The die-hards in the Fort Thunder artist colony yesterday loosed one final cacophonous barrage against a group of developers before the fort falls.

As city officials and business people sipped champagne and swapped compliments under a white tent pitched outside the walls of the fort, the few remaining members of the colony and a lot of their friends gathered nearby to raise Cain about a construction project that is breaking them up.

A warren of old red-brick mill buildings hunkered down along the Woonasquatucket River in the downtrodden Valley section of the city is being emptied to make way for a \$31-million mixed-use development to be anchored by a Shaw's supermarket. Most of the mill space would be demolished.

That controversial development was what Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr. and others were celebrating under the tent. Meanwhile, 30 to 35 artists noisily protested nearby.

Among the affected mill buildings is one on Eagle Street that houses Fort Thunder, a flea market and other low-rent uses. The building would be spared for the most part but its occupants routed.

Fuming about that prospect and the extent of the demolition of historical structures, the artists and their allies used sticks and pipes to keep a dissonant beat by banging on a drum, an overturned bucket and the rail of a chain-link fence. The demonstrators, many in their late teens and 20s and some wearing ghostly face paint, occasionally chanted or yelled.

They displayed pennants and signs of protest, including a long green banner that declared: Nobody Needs Another Shaws.

Gamely fighting the noise inside the tent, the celebrants made speeches about how the project would be an economic boon to the vicinity of Valley Street, Atwells Avenue and Eagle Street.

"We have a better use for this place than to have flea markets on Saturday afternoons," declared Cianci, his voice raised although he had an amplified microphone.

Bernard Rogan, a spokesman for Shaw's, joked later, "I can't think of a better way to start off a birth than with a lot of noise. And that's exactly what we're having here today."

The worst of the racket came from a powerful sound system aimed out the windows of Fort Thunder that created a constant din of unrecognizable sounds.

The development provoked a lengthy political and legal campaign by artists, historical preservationists and others because developers meant to demolish all the 19th-century mill buildings in the project area to clear the way. Some artists see Providence's old mills as one of the few inexpensive places that they can live and work.

Thanks to a compromise being celebrated by the officials and developers, four of the mills are to be saved in whole or in part and incorporated into the development.

The inhabitants of Fort Thunder have been given until the end of the month to move out, leaving them just enough time for one last blast.

Work on the project is about to begin in earnest, and the development company responsible for it, The New England Expedition Providence LLC, hosted a ceremonial groundbreaking yesterday.

The groundbreaking was postponed for a number of weeks as the developers fended off three legal challenges to the project that were raised by abutting property owners.

The city Plan Commission had approved the project, but the abutters appealed to the city Zoning Board of Review.

Gene Beaudoin, a partner in The New England Expedition, and others said the company employed three methods to prevail: It threatened to file multimillion-dollar lawsuits against the appellants for abuse of the legal process, distributed up to \$100,000 in settlements and made a host of concessions, including the pledge of parking spots in the development for neighboring property owners.

One of the appellants was **Monohasset** Mill Project LLC, which is redeveloping an old mill building across the street from the disputed project. The **Monohasset** partners call The New England Expedition's project "a strip mall" and are worried about its impact.

Erik Bright, one of the partners, said they were intimidated by the lawsuit threat but dropped their appeal only after coaxing a long-sought binding agreement from The New England Expedition to do a series of things to make the company's project more palatable to the **Monohasset** partners and other neighbors.

Historical preservationists, city officials and protesters agree that the struggle over Eagle Square has prompted the Cianci administration to redouble its efforts to save worthy old mills and find ways to accommodate the demands of Providence's arts community for affordable live/work spaces.

The mayor credited the Providence Preservation Society, the artist community and many others with helping him to pressure the developers to make the project more emblematic of the city's history and more aesthetically pleasing.

The project to be called Eagle Square would have stores, professional offices

space and 12,000 square feet of loft space to be used by artists to work and exhibit.

Beaudoin disclosed that his company has decided to include a residential component, too: At least 20 residential units on the second and third floors of the three-story Fort Thunder building. He said he is not sure if the units will be rentals or condominiums.

When the project is completed in a year, "they're going to thank us, trust me," City Councilwoman Josephine DiRuzzo said of the project's detractors. An economic surge will ripple through the area, she predicted.

Outside the tent the protest grew edgier and the police complement was increased to about 12. The police escorted some invitees to the groundbreaking back to their cars through a gauntlet of artists. A handful of the demonstrators cursed, gestured derisively and banged sticks together as the people passed.

One demonstrator was arrested but details were not immediately available from the police.

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* NO TO EAGLE SQUARE: Protesters yell and beat on drums, buckets and fences as Providence Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr. leaves yesterday's groundbreaking for Eagle Square, a \$31-million mixed-use development of old mill buildings in the city's Valley section.

JOURNAL PHOTOS / FRIEDA SQUIRES

* DOING THE HONORS: From left, Gene Beaudoin, a partner in The New England Expedition, City Councilwoman Josephine DiRuzzo, Mayor Cianci, and Barry Feldman, of Feldco Development Corp., dig in at yesterday's ceremony.