

At Former Trading Post Site, Parties Trade Charges

By JOE HART

SEA ISLE CITY — Is it concern for the city's congestion problem or "jealousy" holding up redevelopment of the site of the burned-out hardware store on Landis Avenue?

Two well-known city property owners disagree.

In the fall of 2005, a fire destroyed several stores in the 4100 block of Landis Avenue, including the hardware store once known as Creighton's Trading Post.

Principals of the property's corporate owner, A&L LLC, want to tear down the charred construction remains and rebuild a store with seven apartments above.

But both before the fire and after, that redevelopment has been blocked by Charles Dalrymple, owner of Dalrymple Gifts on JFK Boulevard.

Dalrymple told the Herald, "This project is too large, with parking and congestion in the downtown business district already a terrible problem."

On Jan. 18, one of A&L's principals, Angelo Camano of Angelo's Pizzeria, read from a prepared statement at a press conference held in front of the property.

"It saddens me that an amicable solu-

tion has not been found. I hope the other party will drop the challenge," he said.

He concluded his statement by blaming Dalrymple's "jealousy" for holding up the project.

Camano and his partner in A&L, Louis Feola of CMC Air Conditioning and Heating, purchased the property from Honest John LLC of Port Arkansas, Texas, in September 2003.

A little over a year later, A&L applied for zoning board approval of construction that would include a hardware store and eight apartments, with 18 on-site parking spaces.

According to Camano, original plans called for nine apartments, but this was reduced due to a contested area of land behind the property where railroad tracks used to run.

The zoning board unanimously approved the proposal in April 2005.

In May of that year, however, Dalrymple challenged the board's decision.

"Several ordinances were circumvented, two or three very serious," Dalrymple said, noting his particular concern with parking requirements.

In October 2005, Judge Steven Perskie ruled in Dalrymple's favor, finding that the board exceeded its power in granting the zoning variances.

According to Perskie, the board made its decision assuming that the principal use of the mixed-use property would be commercial. But there was no clear definition of "principal use" in a city ordinance, the judge said, and he found that based on square footage and parking allotment, the principal use appeared to be residential.

Both A&L and the board

appealed, but an appellate court affirmed Perskie's decision in August 2006.

In the interim, the city adopted an ordinance defining "principal use" as the use located on the ground floor of a mixed-use property. Using this definition, the principal use of A&L's property is deemed commercial.

With the "principal use" problem addressed, the zoning board again granted A&L the variances it sought for the project in December. The current plans are for a hardware store, seven apartments and 18 parking spaces.

On Jan. 3, Dalrymple's attorney Charles Gemmel notified A&L of plans to again challenge the zoning board's decision.

That letter prompted Camano to hold his press conference.

"Dalrymple wanted to buy the property himself," Camano charged. "He

was under contract with the sellers, but the deal fell through over inventory and other issues."

He explained how he and Feola stepped in and purchased the property for the same price Dalrymple was going to pay.

"We just didn't try to negotiate over the price of the inventory," he said.

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Burned-out buildings front Landis Avenue.



Fire exposed building's ancient lathing.

Camano suggested that Dalrymple probably would have made the same plans as he for the property if Dalrymple's bid had been successful.

"He has a non-conforming building with four apartments above his gift shop with no extra parking," Camano said. "How is that any better than what we are trying to do? That's what I meant by saying jealousy was involved."

"He shouldn't use the court system to exact revenge over a business deal," Camano said.

Dalrymple asserted that his opposition is not personal. His complaint is with the zoning board's decision, he said, and at

base what he hopes for is positive change in the city.

Mayor Leonard Desiderio had his own view of the city's role when he attended Camano's press conference.

"The city is not holding up this project," the mayor said. "We must move on and get rid of this eyesore. I don't want to go through another summer season looking like this."

Learning of Desiderio's comments, Dalrymple said, "I agree with the mayor that we need to reshape the commercial district, but I think we should do it the right, healthy way."

He said the city should change its zoning laws in a manner that takes into

consideration its congestion and parking problems.

If he wins his current appeal, Dalrymple hopes the city will modernize its zoning laws to address the city's existing conditions.

If he loses, he has not yet decided whether he will pursue his complaint to the next level.

Camano, who plans to run for city council in the upcoming election, said of the press conference, "I wanted to explain to the residents of Sea Isle why the burned-out building remains in the middle of the downtown district."

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"We must move on and get rid of this eyesore," Mayor Leonard Desiderio said of burned-out site.