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RISKY BUSINESS

Falling concrete, numerous code violations force strip of buildings in Square to close

Wednesday, November 17, 2004

By Molly Bloom
Journal staff writer

Unsafe building conditions, including a large crack in the brick facade of a building on Sip Avenue, led Jersey City to close a strip of commercial buildings in Journal Square yesterday and to issue the owners several citations for code violations.

At about 10 a.m. yesterday, a Jersey City Incinerator Authority employee saw a piece of concrete fall from the rear facade of 8 Journal Square, said Donald Smartt, district administrator of the Journal Square Restoration Corp.

The incident sparked a flurry of responses from city inspectors as fire trucks, police cars and emergency vehicles dotted the parking lot in front of the site, at Sip and Bergen avenues.

Their investigations left Journal Square businesses, including McDonald's, Wendy's and KFC, barricaded from hungry customers by yellow police tape throughout the day.

"That crack's been there for years and now they're just noticing it," said leesha Pearson, chatting with friends in the Square yesterday. "I wanted a double cheeseburger, but now I'm just hungry."

Inspectors expected to allow the businesses to reopen as soon as safety violations were rectified and remained at the site throughout the day to oversee efforts to bring the buildings up to code, Smartt said.

The buildings at 1 through 8 Journal Square, which include a 99-cent store and a Subway restaurant, were cited for violations that include locked rear access points and falling concrete, Smartt said. No. 16 Journal Square, where the McDonald's is, was cited for not having a rear entrance, he said.

No. 22 Journal Square, a tan brick structure on the corner of Bergen and Sip avenues, was cited for numerous violations, including electrical problems and structural failure, Smartt said. The building's brick parapet is unstable and the brick facade is slowly separating from the face of the building, Smartt said. Yesterday, a large crack at the top of the parapet was clearly visible from the street.

The buildings in violation are owned by three separate entities: Madison Acquisitions L.P. and Oxford Acquisitions L.P., of 240 W. 40th St., New York City, and 15-16 Realty Corp. of 165 Martin Luther King Drive, Jersey City. The owner of Nos. 17 through 23 Journal Square, Adams Acquisition L.P., was cited for 21 fire code violations in May 2003.

Attempts to reach the owners were unsuccessful yesterday.

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"These tenants pay \$5,000 to \$7,000 a month in rent and occupy properties whose owners have amassed significant building, health and safety code violations in the past two years," said Smartt.

The rear of several of the buildings about a parking lot owned by NJ Transit and leased to Central Parking. For the past several months, workers at the site have been removing a steel roofing structure connected to the buildings by steel girders. City inspectors theorized that the cutting of one of the girders earlier this month caused the concrete to fall yesterday morning.

Since the parking lot is owned by a state agency, no local permits were required for the work, Smartt said.

Demolition of the steel roof has been suspended until Central Parking's engineer certifies that the roof's removal will not result in an "unsafe condition," said Smartt.

Employees who work in some of the buildings said they have been in poor condition for years.

"The building is not safe," said Sawsan Sithon, who works in a second-floor office above 16 Journal Square.

She said she has seen falling bricks and water leaks in the building for more than a year.

"They shut us all down. Of course we'll be losing money," said M. Kim, owner of the McDonald's, at 16 Journal Square, who declined to give his full name.

Mike Patel, owner of 99-Cent & Up, estimated that he would lose about \$2,000 in business each day his store was closed.

The crowds gathered by the yellow tape barriers around the stores were generally unconcerned about the disruption to their routines.

Rose and John Serpico of Jersey City emerged from their regular teeth-cleaning appointments at Dr. Roger Doyle's second-floor dental office at 15 Journal Square to find police officers and fire trucks blocking their path.

John Serpico has been seeing Dr. Doyle for the past 60 or so years, he said.

"Even if they're bombing I'll go to Dr. Doyle," he said.

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