

Hill Reacts To 18th St. Rent Hike Threat

By Ruth Passen

The quiet harmony of residents and businesses on Potrero Hill was replaced by outrage and concern in late September when the neighborhood learned that new owners of a property on 18th Street apparently expect a huge increase in rent from the current tenants.

The owners of Good Life Grocery at 1457 18th St. learned in early August that the building in which their business is located had been sold, and met one of the new owners at that time. In the course of the next few weeks, Good Life owners emphasized they were willing to negotiate a rent figure based on the going market rate in the community - a basic 80¢ per sq. ft. with a proviso of a lease.

Irving Zaretsky, a representative for The Potrero Group, new owners of the property that extends from 1453 to 1469 18th St. (Just for You, Good Life, Chip's Liquors, Mayflower Saloon and restaurant),

and 317 Connecticut St. (Bare Essentials), has asked for what he claims is the market rate, \$1.25 per sq ft, according to Good Life owner Kayren Hudiburgh.

The Good Life tenants have been paying a remarkably low rent of \$275 per month, but simple arithmetic projects that the increased rent demand would amount to \$3,000 per month for 2400 sq ft of store space (including storage, office and other non-selling sq footage), which would be an increase of 991%.

"We've been ready for eight months to pay more rent" (since the death of former owner Rita Petroni put the property into probate court), Hudiburgh said, "but expected to have a lease."

In an interview with Good Life owner Hudiburgh, it was learned that there seemed to be an initial refusal to negotiate for a lease, though she had asked Zaretsky for one, or for an option if the new owners were planning a major renovation. She said that a flat "no" was the answer. Zaretsky told her, Hudiburgh said, that if she couldn't afford to stay, there were plenty of potential tenants who would be willing to pay the rent.

The View spoke with Zaretsky who refused to answer any questions, especially any query as to what the new owners planned to do with the property.

One of the four partners of The Potrero Group, Dr. Arnold Smoller, is a Hill resident. When asked about the group's intentions, he claimed they are not interested in major changes, that they wanted to keep the nature of the neighborhood as it is, and that there were no immediate plans for the property. He denied Hudiburgh's allegations that a rent figure has been offered by his partners, but indicated that only Zaretsky had been involved in the deliberations.

A concerned store owner reminisced that most of the businesses were started on 18th Street by Hill residents who felt that what they provided in merchandise was a service to Potrero Hill, and helped bring the community together.

Many of the shops had been closed and boarded up on 18th Street for years: In 1965 the Mayflower Saloon, Chip's Liquors, a barber shop, grocery store, mercantile store, and a thrift store were the only businesses to flourish in the vicinity of 18th, Connecticut and Missouri Streets.

Today, most of the businesses are still owned by Hill residents who hire community people and give jobs to local youth.

"This is a nurturing, family type neighborhood - a real community," said Judy Williams of Arkansas Street. "I raised my family on this hill and now I work in one of the stores here. If that business had to close because of a huge rent increase, it and the loss of any of the other businesses would

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diminish the nature of what this community is all about," she said.

Williams told the View that the spirit of the community was personified to her by the original owners of De Rosa's Grocery on 20th Street, Ninfa and Mario who helped her locate and purchase her home when she was new to the Hill 20 years ago. To illustrate the difference between then and what is happening now, she told of how her neighbor, Dr. Smoller, has been into the store where she works, and never once mentioned to her that he was the new owner. That, she says, is definitely not a "personal touch."

The Good Life Grocery opened for business in 1974 and was run as a collective, with 13 partners, most of whom grew up and lived on the Hill most of their lives. One of the first partners still works at the store. Hudiburgh helped to teach the original owners how to choose stock and merchandise the products, but didn't become involved in the ownership until 1976, when the partnership changed hands.

Hudiburgh said it took the first five years to build and structure the business, and in the last five years the business has grown to such an extent she and her staff had drawn up plans to expand and bring

in bigger refrigeration.

"If our rents go up, we have no intention of raising the prices of our merchandise," says the Good Life owner. "The best way to keep our customers and to also make money is to increase the volume of what we offer, and to continue to attract new customers," she said.

At presstime, Good Life and The Potrero Group were still in negotiations over a fair and equitable rent increase, and the store is still very much open for business.

In the meantime, hundreds of signatures have been collected on an independent petition which says "...the Good Life Grocery's continued existence is in jeopardy because new owners are proposing an extravagant increase in rent with no lease. We the undersigned feel that the Good Life is a vital and integral part of our neighborhood and we support the store's efforts to negotiate an equitable lease and to stay in business at its present location. Furthermore, we urge elected officials/commissions/neighborhood organizations and community and business leaders to hear our concern and to help us resolve this very upsetting turn of events in our community."

Good Life