

Arcade upgrade may be delayed until fall

Shops still open

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PROVIDENCE -- Less than a week from the day when the shops in the Arcade are supposed to pack up and move out to make way for new development, it seems like business as usual in the 180-year-old indoor mall.

There are no moving boxes anywhere to be seen. Nearly every business remains open. Lines form for Greek food at Le Greque. Doomsday, it seems, has been put on hold for the moment.

The Arcade's owner, Granoff Associates, announced on May 29 that the shops must leave by June 30, to make way for a possible conversion of America's oldest indoor mall into a single tenant store.

Some of the shops have called the Arcade home for nearly 30 years, and they felt that 30 days was an unrealistic time frame to find a new home. They hired legal help, and tried to get an extension. Now, it looks like they may be successful in buying more time -- perhaps until September.

Negotiations are under way between lawyers for the tenants and for the Granoffs, and yesterday afternoon it seemed they might come to an agreement today. Neither Evan, nor Lloyd Granoff could be reached for comment yesterday.

"I think we do have some good legal issues to at least help them out with," John Dineen, lawyer for the tenants, said.

"We do not intend that the Arcade will be chained shut on July 1. ... I'm optimistic that we'll be able to maybe make the best of a bad situation," he said.

Don Boehner, owner of the jewelry store Copacetic, has helped to lead the drive to gain more time. He now expects that he may get until Sept. 1 to vacate. The short notice, he said, angered many in the community, and they have received support from many quarters.

"There's so many people upset about it on all levels," Boehner said.

City Council members Seth Yurdin and Luis Aponte drafted a letter to the Granoffs yesterday expressing their displeasure, said Aponte. Council members are also crafting an ordinance that would place the Arcade on the city's Industrial and Commercial Buildings District, which might provide additional protection.

"We're pulling something together. Myself and some of my colleagues were unhappy with the way long-term tenants were treated over there. I'm not sure that's the type of message we want to send to the business community," Aponte said.

Some shopowners, not willing to wait and risk being tossed out Tuesday, are leaving.

"I'm getting out of here. There's no sense in staying," said Bob Lepore, who runs the Arcade Barber Shop. He'll be moving to the fourth floor of nearby 76 Dorrance St., where he'll hang his barber's pole outside the renamed Bob's Barber Shop.

Two of the most active businesses have found new space together, only a block from the Arcade in the site of a former art gallery at 17 Peck St. Bette Hills' Providence Cookie Co. and Boehner's Copacetic will each take a side of the storefront. Between them, they have been Arcade tenants for 50 years.

"We're going to be the Arcade refugee camp. Cookies and jewelry? Women who come in hear that and say, 'What could be better?' " Boehner said.

Sal LiBassi hasn't been able to find a new location for his store, Shalmar Fashion Eyewear, and he isn't sure what he'll do if he's kicked out.

"We looked all over," LiBassi said. "I couldn't be out on Tuesday. I just couldn't."

He'll look back fondly on his time in the Arcade -- particularly pre-2005, when it was busier.

"I like it here. It's safe. When it was busy, it was a nice place to do business," he said.

The Arcade was built in 1828, and renovated in 1901 and 1980. Johnson & Wales University bought the building in 1995.

The businesses in the Arcade have operated on month-to-month leases since the Granoffs took full ownership of the property in February 2006. Since then, nearly 20 businesses have closed their doors and the Granoffs have not accepted new tenants, knowing that they would be renovating the structure.

The Granoffs plan an \$8-million renovation, and hope to bring in a single tenant to occupy the space. They say the Arcade has been a consistent money-loser for them and for most of the previous owners.

Since the news broke last month that the shops would close, longtime customers have trickled into many of the shops to pay final visits, send best wishes, and find out if relocation was possible.

"Everybody's been so supportive," Hills said, bantering with customer after customer, many of them regulars.

A customer in a Key West, Fla., shirt walked up to the counter and ordered a cookie. It set Hills' mind to work, imagining the possibilities.

"I want to go to Key West. "I think Key West Cookie Company has a great ring to it," she said.

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Credit: Daniel Barbarisi, Journal Staff Writer

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