Simplex protesters hold tent city demonstration

(Continued from page 1)

among others, Boston City Councilor David Scannell and Frederick J. Foreman G of People Against Racism at MIT. Saturday evening included a dinner and musical performance.

The organizers had planned for protesters to spend Saturday night in tents on the two streets. About 40 tents were put up — so many that protesters were forced to use a vacant MIT lot nearby. Cavellini said.

Of the 100 people who stayed overnight, 30—40 were homeless people who had been attracted by the protest's offer of shelter and a free breakfast Saturday morning.

“We did not plan to house homeless people on the site,” Cavellini said. But the turnout of homeless forced the SSC to change its plans, and accommodate the homeless. “In a sense, it was an education for us about the desperate plight of the homeless, less we said,” the protest was supposed to end with a community breakfast and a speech by Melvin H. King, adjunct professor of urban and community planning at MIT and a well-known activist and politician.

The city permit allowing the protesters to close Blanche and Green Streets ran out at 1 a.m. that day, Cavellini said.

But some of the homeless people did not leave. As of Sunday night, about a dozen homeless people were still on the MIT lot, using tents donated by individual protesters. They claimed that they plan to stay there.

“I personally sympathize with their effort to find decent housing,” Cavellini said. But he disavowed their effort. SSC had nothing to do with the homeless people's decision to stay, he said.

Milne was aware that a few tents were still up, but would not speculate on what action MIT might take if the homeless people did not leave.

Protesters attack University Park

The “tent city” protest was primarily directed against MIT's commercial development package for University Park, one part of the Simplex site.

MIT's developer, Forest City Enterprises, plans to construct 11 buildings over the next ten years, including a 35-story hotel/convention center, business offices, research and development space, restaurants, shops and 250 apartment units. Six acres of parks and open spaces are also planned for the 27 acres, which stretch between MIT and Central Square, west of Massachusetts Avenue.

The first building on the Simplex site was completed last month. It is located on 26 Landowne Street, behind the NECCO factory. The protest will be slated to research and development.

The Cambridge City Council approved a Blue Ribbon Commission report on the proposed construction in Cambridgeport last February. Following the council vote, the Cambridge Community Development Department, the planning arm of the city, began studying zoning change recommendations and traffic studies necessary to implement the plan.

Those recommendations should be made public next week. The council will then begin deliberations on whether to approve the recommendations.

The process could take as long as three months, Cavellini said.

The SSC and other community resident groups are pushing for the inclusion of more housing and light industry in the development package. The current plan calls for 250 apartment units; the SSC wants that number increased to 450. Cavellini said. It also wants a third of the units reserved for low-income housing.

Even though the council has already approved Forest City's plans, Cavellini believed the city could be persuaded to change its mind and reverse the areas in such a way as to force MIT to include more housing units. Events like this weekend's protest dramatize community worries, he said.

Milne could not say what the council would decide.

Cavellini also believed that MIT could be made to change its mind. “There are differences of opinion within MIT” over how the Simplex area should be developed. The developer's initial plan called for only 110 housing units, but community pressure forced that number up to 250, Cavellini noted.

Cavellini blamed MIT for the confrontational relationship with resident groups like SSC. MIT and Forest City excluded the community from the decision process, he claimed.

Milne argued that 250 housing units represent a considerable improvement in the housing situation. Many community groups support the present development plan, he said.

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