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Building a Sensible Square

We need more 'surgical interventions' to keep Harvard Square alive

By The Crimson Staff

When students and residents who live around Harvard Square wish to shop for groceries, their choices are severely limited. There has been no true grocery store in the Square for seven years.

It is therefore with relief and growling stomachs that we anticipate the arrival of Market in the Square, a grocery store that will cater specifically to students. Harvard Real Estate Services (HRES) should be commended for intervening in the Square's pricy commercial real estate market to bring in a business that was badly needed, but that the free market could not provide.

The Market's impending opening is the result of a directive to HRES from former University President Lawrence H. Summers, who was apparently concerned that such a business would not break into an environment in which, seemingly, attracts only banks and national chains. For the last year and half, HRES has leased the vacant space at the corner of Brattle and Church streets at a cost of several hundred thousand dollars until they could find a grocer to occupy it. This sort of "surgical intervention" as James W. Gray, associate vice president of HRES, termed it could not simply be left up to other landlords.

Although HRES has declared that it would not employ these methods in the future, rather than forswear the tactics it employed to install the Market in the Square, they should consider that they may be required again. As the Square becomes ever-more corporatized, such "surgical" methods may again become necessary to attract businesses that fill a hole created by skyrocketing rents.

Harvard Square is decidedly less distinctive than it once was. With the arrival of every new bank branch and national chain, the Square loses some of the edge that traditionally set it apart as a funky hangout for college students and eccentric residents of Cambridge. Gentrification and high rents have driven out many longstanding businesses, including late-night diners and bookstores that, besides catering to students, contributed to the Square's unique atmosphere. A number of other Square "fixtures," including the Brattle theatre, have had to be saved by generous patrons.

The sort of "surgical intervention" employed to open the Market in the square should serve as a model for HRES and Harvard in the future to preserve and attract the types of businesses that give the Square its offbeat ambience. Besides being good for student life, such a policy would hopefully preserve what's left of Harvard Square's quirky character that makes it a fun place to live and visit.