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Their beef with builders

Meat-district locals send firm packing

By SAM SMITH

In a double-fisted battle to preserve the status quo, an ad-hoc group of the Meat Packing District's business owners and preservationists have quashed a proposed apartment tower in the neighborhood and now want the area designated a historic district.

The group, which comprises meatpackers, nightclub owners, restaurateurs and preservationists, last month forced Manhattan-based Landmark Development to withdraw its application for a city zoning variance, which it needed to build an apartment tower in the strictly commercial confines of the Meat Packing District.

The company said it withdrew its application because of community protest, which it felt had effectively swayed the city against its proposal.

On Tuesday, the city will decide if Landmark can re-submit its application in the future.

Landmark says it now hopes to put a hotel on the



TASK FORCE: Biz owners (l. to r.) Andrew Berman, David Rabin and Raymond Destefano. Michael Sofronski

property at 848 Washington St., which, as a business, opponents would be unable to stop.

The meatpackers and nightclub owners argue that a residential building in the neighborhood would mean the demise of their businesses.

"The businesses here are flourishing," said David Rabin, owner of the nightclub Lotus, which is hosting a Tuesday-night party to celebrate the group's victory over Landmark.

"From about 2 a.m. 'til 10, the meatpackers work, then retail goes all day, then from about 8 at night to 4 in the morning, it's nightlife," he said. "Residential would disrupt that and send us down the path of SoHo and the Flatiron District."

Now the group, called the Save Gansevoort Market Taskforce, is looking to score a victory in the second part of its neighborhood defense. For 2½ years, the task force has been mustering its argument for the historic

designation of the neighborhood.

Last Tuesday, the task force got its first chance to lay it out at a city Landmarks Preservation Commission hearing. Just getting a hearing is vote of confidence, said Robert Tierney, chair of the commission. But weeks of review must now take place before a decision is made, he said.

If granted a historic designation, any changes or alterations to buildings within the Meat Packing District — defined roughly as the area bordered West 15th, Washington, Hudson and Gansevoort streets — would have to get approval from the city. Any demolition of buildings would have to go before a public hearing.

"You've got a neighborhood that has a tightly unified theme in terms of its look and history," said Andrew Berman, executive director of the task force. "And that's exactly what historic districts are meant to protect."

Opponents say the area isn't worthy of the designation.

"A historic district designates a particular type of architecture to be preserved," says Stephen Touhey, a managing partner at Landmark Development. "I don't see that a particular type of architecture exists here."