



The Times

Fuzzy math

Eminent domain property acquisition for the Newark arena pushes out a small business owner

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Jorge Aguayo makes pom poms, although not the kind cheerleaders use.

The ones he makes are smaller.

They are used on clown costumes, ladies' tennis socks, the tip of Santa Claus hats. Cats also play with them, and many go on to become Weepuls, a cast of small, round, fuzzy creatures with plastic eyes, antennae and paper feet.

For the past 22 years, Aguayo's company, Multicolor, has been manufacturing pom poms of various colors and sizes from his shop on Liberty Street in Newark. The acrylic balls get shipped from the downtown location to companies all across the country and parts of Europe, Latin and Central America.

"This is my baby," he said.

But Aguayo has become a casualty of eminent domain and development plans surrounding the Prudential Center arena, which is under construction. He is packing up his pom pom operation with plans to leave the state's largest city for Pennsylvania, where he said it is cheaper to do business, and a lot more welcoming.

He tried to stay in New Jersey, but a property in Washington had environmental issues. He found another site on Frelinghuysen Avenue in Newark, but the process to get a variance from the city planning board took too long.

The Newark Housing Authority, which is acquiring the property on behalf of the city, wanted him out of the building by March 5. Aguayo said getting approvals for the variance would have gone past the deadline.

Aguayo understands he has to leave. He just doesn't understand why it had to be so soon. His property is located within phase II of the development area and construction hasn't started for the parking that is likely to replace his business.

"What is the rush?" he asked.

Pressed to meet the March 5 deadline, Aguayo has found a building in Coplay, Pa. He said he signed a contract and should close the deal in a couple of weeks if the property passes inspection.

Aguayo, who came to Newark from Chile on a cargo ship, said leaving the city hurts.

"Newark gave me the opportunity to be where I am today."

When he came here 22 years ago, Aguayo said he made a living parking cars before he fell into the pom pom business.

When he needed more money, he landed a job with a company that made the fuzzy material. He worked at the company for several years, then left to start his own business when he developed a machine to make a better pom pom, one that would be held together with string instead of wire.

Aguayo, who has an engineering and machinist background, said he wanted to stay in Newark, but the

eminent domain process hurts hardworking people like himself.

"I built my business with my sweat," he said. "I stayed here when nobody wanted to come here."

His attorney, William Ward, said the housing authority offered him \$1.1 million for his business, then increased the offer to \$1.5 when Aguayo's machinery was included. Ward appealed the offer and a commissioners' panel recommended he receive \$2.1 million.

Aguayo said he thinks it's still too low, but he agreed with the commissioners' settlement. The housing authority, however, hasn't said anything to Aguayo or his attorney.

"Who's making the decisions?" Ward said. "They want him out of the property, but nobody can give us any answers. Jorge is frustrated."

Tory Gunsolley, a housing authority spokesman, said the agency is appealing the commissioners' \$2.1 decision and still trying to settle with Aguayo.

The March 5 deadline has come and gone. Unfortunately, so is Aguayo.

"All I want now is to move forward," he said. "I have no choice."

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