

# Some hope hot dog stand is a washout

Owner says establishment will add jobs, opponents say it would attract trouble

By Rex W. Huppke | Tribune reporter

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**Robert Bernstein wants to open a hot dog stand next to his carwash on Ashland Avenue near 79th Street. After he bought the carwash five years ago, he said, "I cleaned it up, and now I haven't had a problem with vandalism since we've been here." (Tribune photo by Michael Tercha / July 8, 2009)**

The four lanes of South Ashland Avenue pierce 79th Street, and on the corners, there's tension. It's a bustling nexus of gang turfs, made worse by space to congregate -- a gas station parking lot and a fast-food joint open around the clock.

A half-block north on Ashland there's a tidy carwash owned by a businessman eager to open a hot dog stand. To him, it's a no-brainer: The walk-up food shop would boost business at the carwash and allow him to keep the place open, and it would bring revenue and a few jobs to a neighborhood in dire need of both.

But Robert Bernstein has found that what makes sense to him -- what intuitively seems a plus for an economically needy neighborhood -- doesn't necessarily jibe with the day-to-day realities in this swath of the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood.

A group of residents, aided by the Target Area Development Corp., have campaigned -- thus far successfully -- to keep Bernstein from opening the stand.

Their concern is that it will attract gang members and neighborhood thugs, joining an array of nearby fast-food restaurants that have devolved into hot spots for violence.

"We, as regular citizens, would not be able to go to that hot dog stand," said Jeannie Wainwright, who lives nearby and has stood with dozens of others in opposition to the business. "It would just be another hangout, another place for narcotics exchanges. Any place where they can loiter, they just seem to take over."

Bernstein believes he can run the hot dog stand and keep the riffraff away.

"I bought that carwash five years ago and the place was a drug haven," Bernstein said. "So I started locking it up at night and I got a guy who watches the place all the time. I cleaned it up, and now I haven't had a problem with vandalism since we've been here."

In the last six months there have been no police calls to the carwash for criminal activity, the [Chicago Police Department](#) said, and even those opposed to the hot dog stand say Bernstein has done a fine job running his business. But, they say, he just doesn't understand the neighborhood the way they do.

"It's the type of business he's proposing," said Efua Enaholo, a lead organizer at the Target Area Development Corp., which helped residents form the Campaign to Prevent the Hot Dog Stand. "It might sound like a hot dog stand is no big deal, but we've seen it -- residents have seen it."

Eddie Johnson, commander of the Gresham District police headquarters, agrees with the residents, saying in a letter to the Department of Business Affairs and Licensing, "Crime analysis in this area boldly suggests an increase in public violence which includes gang activity, aggravated batteries and robberies with the placement of this business."

Efrat Stein, spokeswoman for the city's licensing department, said public input does not factor into the decision to grant a retail food license. But there is a city ordinance that could lead to the revocation of a license if a business that's open late becomes a public nuisance, Stein said.

Bernstein -- who applied for his license last March but still needs to pass a health inspection -- believes the process is being complicated by pressure from the community group.

Carwash manager Will Harris, who is black, and other employees said they believe Bernstein's race may be at the heart of the dispute.

"He's a white man trying to do something in a black neighborhood," one employee said. "He's doing everything he possibly can, but they won't give him a chance."

Bernstein won't blame the problems on race, and opponents of the hot dog stand say that's simply not a factor.

"It has nothing to do with him, it has to do with the type of business he wants to open," Wainwright said. "If he wanted to sell clothes or shoes or something like that, it'd be fine. But we know these kids around here and we know what they gravitate toward."