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BRIAN MCGRORY

For now, they can park it

By Brian McGrory, Globe Columnist | July 16, 2010

Ask a politician about the weather these days and they'll say it's a good climate for jobs. What are they doing this weekend? Creating jobs. What's their favorite color? Green, the color of money, which is what you get from jobs.

But talk is one thing; actions are something else entirely. And for that, let's take a look at the National Park Service, which was about to put many good people out of work at a really unfortunate time.

In short, the Park Service decided years ago that it would like to move its visitors center from State Street to the lobby of Faneuil Hall, the famed city-owned meeting house at the entrance to Quincy Market.

It makes endless sense, given the throngs of tourists. So federal officials secured a \$7 million earmark to build a reception center, and the city provided the space. The money would go toward a sweeping circular staircase and all sorts of state-of-the-art amenities.

There's just one problem with this plan. There are a dozen small businesses that operate in the dim lobby that the Park Service is planning to gut. Think postcard shop, candy store, coffee shop favored by locals, and newsstand that attracts area office workers.

These businesses are there in the winter when the wind howls down Congress Street and customers are few and far between. And they make their money in the summer and fall when tourists are everywhere.

So when does the National Park service choose to send everyone packing? You guessed it. The owners got letters last month telling them to be out by Sept. 14, smack in the middle of the busiest month of the year. So much for jobs, jobs, jobs.

As I walked the cracked tile floors earlier this week, it felt like Colonial times, with shopkeepers plying specialty wares to people who traveled great distances to buy them. The owners acknowledged that the visitors center will be an improvement. But the timing was cruel.

"It's our Christmas," said Linda Levine, an artist who owns Stamp of Approval, a rubber stamp and sticker shop.

Kostas Rigas stood behind the counter at his newsstand, International News, and said, "We are not trying to tell them they are wrong or they did something bad. But give us the month and a half." Rigas hired an attorney, Susan Murphy, whose letter to the National Park Service didn't get a response.

When I called the Park Service, a nice official, Sean Hennessey, gave me an elaborate explanation of why the government had no choice on the timing.

"There's never a good time to do this," said Hennessey. "But this is an exciting project."

Indeed, it would be as exciting in November, which is what I said to Michael Galvin, the city's respected chief of public property. Galvin replied that he's already stalled the closure twice, and delayed it until after Labor Day this year. He said the feds needed to spend money by October or risk losing it.

When I pointed out that the feds hadn't even hired a contractor yet, meaning they weren't likely to start the renovation on time, there was silence on the other end of the line. "Let me call you back," he said.

That call came yesterday. Galvin said the city and Park Service agreed that shopkeepers have until Oct. 31 to shutter and Nov. 7 to vacate. "We had a discussion," Galvin said.

Hennessey later added, "We looked at the big picture and determined we would be able to do it."

Now we're talking. "This is wonderful," Levine said late yesterday.

There's one more thing. Some shopkeepers hope to return after the renovation, but have been given no guarantee they'll get preference, even if they've been there 15 years.

Mr. Galvin?

A little exasperated now: "We can take their longevity into account."

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