



*Cafe Abir, one of many neighborhood businesses along the Lower Divisadero Corridor*

## Neighbors Block Another Chain Store on Divisadero

*by Dean Preston and Dan Nguyen-Tan, 2007-11-05*

In an important test case of Proposition G, neighbors have successfully blocked a new chain store at the corner of Divisadero and Oak Street. Wisconsin-based Batteries Plus, with over 300 stores nationwide, sought to open its first San Francisco store at this location. Neighbors, armed with an extensive city-sponsored planning study reflecting the neighborhood's anti-chain store preferences, presented a united opposition to Batteries Plus.

On November 1, the Planning Commission unanimously voted to block the project after significant neighborhood mobilization – over 460 petition signatures from neighbors. A broad coalition of neighborhood residents spoke against Batteries Plus' application. Every major neighborhood group in the area opposed the project, including Haight Divisadero Neighbors and Merchants, Alamo Square Neighborhood Association, North of Panhandle Neighborhood Association and Central City Progressives.

Under Proposition G, chain stores seeking to open in neighborhood commercial districts must obtain conditional use authorization from the Planning Commission. The measure ensures that neighbors have a say in whether chain stores locate in their neighborhoods.

Neighbors have long opposed chain stores in this stretch of the Divisadero corridor, mounting successful campaigns to defeat Burger King, Domino's Pizza and Blockbuster from moving onto Divisadero. In the meantime, new local businesses like Mojo Bicycle Café, Madrone Lounge and Metro Kathmandu have opened in the neighborhood and overall vacancies have decreased.

Neighborhood residents argued in this case that the Planning Commission should honor the neighborhood planning process undertaken by the City over the last two years. The published results of the Lower Divisadero Corridor Business Survey were clear: the neighborhood opposes formula retail chains, auto-serving businesses, and wants businesses that primarily serve the neighborhood.

Batteries Plus is a franchise chain that exclusively sells batteries, with car batteries representing 8% of their sales nationally, and would draw customers from throughout the City since the Batteries Plus business model typically allows for only one or two stores per city. Some neighbors argued that Batteries Plus might receive a warmer welcome from neighbors in other commercial corridors, such as Van Ness Ave, that were considered by the franchisees before they selected Divisadero.

Notwithstanding the planning study and the overwhelming neighborhood opposition, Planning Department representative Jonas Ionin recommended approval of the project. Although the Commission

ultimately rejected the Department's recommendation, serious questions remain as to why the Planning Department would recommend approval of a business so clearly at odds with community wishes – and why the Planning Department failed to advise the Batteries Plus proponents to seek input from various neighborhood groups prior to submitting their permit application and to contact the City's own part-time economic development staff person responsible for promoting businesses in the Lower Divisadero corridor.

This block of Divisadero, between Oak and Fell Streets, is particularly important for future Divisadero planning. With three gas stations and only a few commercial storefronts, the block divides two more pedestrian-friendly stretches of Divisadero that serve as home to variety of locally-owned businesses selling anything from comic books, kitchen supplies, truffles, to home hardware. Neighbors argued that it was essential to have pedestrian-friendly, neighborhood-serving businesses in these pivotal storefronts.

Martini Cleaners, a small family owned business, had been in this location for a decade. The landlord sought to increase their rent by over 100%, a prohibitive increase. Some residents feared that allowing a chain store to come in under these circumstances could have set a dangerous precedent, encouraging commercial landlords along Divisadero to jack up rents and hold out for chain stores who can pay higher rents, rather than working with independent local businesses.

The Planning Commission decision comes on the heels of a controversial effort by Starbucks to locate a store in the inner Richmond district. In that case, the Planning Commission approved the Starbucks over neighborhood objections, only to be overturned by the Board of Supervisors. Neighborhood organizers against Batteries Plus believe that the Starbucks decision by the Board of Supervisors gave the Planning Commission more reason to more carefully consider their votes on Batteries Plus.

Together the Starbucks and Batteries Plus decisions send a strong message to chain stores seeking to open in certain neighborhood commercial districts, as well as to commercial landlords seeking to obtain top dollar by renting to chain stores: don't waste time on plans that are opposed by the neighborhood.

The unanimous Planning Commission vote and neighborhood organizing related to Batteries Plus prove that Prop. G is working, providing San Franciscans a voice in determining the character of their neighborhoods.

*Dean Preston is a resident of the Divisadero neighborhood and opposed Battery Plus' application. Dan Nguyen-Tan serves on the Board of North of Panhandle Neighborhood Association*