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Courtyard dispute a battle of wills

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CHAPEL HILL -- As barriers go, it's unimpressive, a line of railroad timbers cutting across a parking lot off West Franklin Street. But, symbolically, it's a miniature Mason-Dixon line.

On one side is gray-haired Southern land baron P.H. Craig. On the other, Long Island Yankee Spencer Young III.

Young, 51, owns The Courtyard of Chapel Hill, home to the popular Mexican popsicle shop Locopops and restaurants Penang and Bonne Soiree, 3Cups coffee, wine and tea shop and Sandwich sandwich shop.

Craig, 70, owns most of the parking lot that serves The Courtyard. About six months ago, Craig blocked off his section with railroad ties and gravel piles. The Courtyard's parking dropped from 79 spaces to 23.

The move, which Young calls "Machiavellian," has hobbled his tenants, bothered customers and dragged public officials into a private matter.

Craig won't sell Young his share of the lot. Young won't pay Craig "a red cent" in rent.

"I really have said from the beginning, 'No, no, no,' " said Craig, who owns nearly 100 acres on 16 properties in Orange County assessed at more than \$2.6 million. "I've never sold anything I ever bought."

Tenants say Young has poured about \$1 million into renovating the property, and he has asked the town to seize Craig's land by eminent domain. A 28-year-old development permit ties the two properties together. Without the parking, The Courtyard is out of compliance.



There are few parking spots available in the reduced parking area beyond The Courtyard complex off West Franklin Street due to a long-running dispute between the owner of the complex and the parking lot owner.

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"There is no dispute," Craig said. "He just won't pay his bill."

Town And Others Have Tried To Help

Young calls the conflict "a donnybrook of magnanimous proportion."

Public officials have tried to help. They bagged 35 parking meters on nearby Cameron Avenue for Courtyard employees. The Orange County government has offered 60 nearby parking spaces for a low-cost lease, but only for valet parking.

Business leaders have intervened. The Chapel Hill Downtown Partnership even paid for legal mediation, to no avail.

Lousy Landlord

Meanwhile, the impasse over parking is driving away customers.

A longtime New Yorker, Young worked on Wall Street for Morgan Stanley and bought an East Durham strip mall about the time his oldest son enrolled at Duke in 2004. In 2005, Young moved to Chapel Hill and bought The Courtyard for \$3 million.

Over the course of their two-year battle, Young has blamed Craig for a sewer backup that flooded the former Stock Exchange clothing store, charging him and others with sabotage. He has accused Alexander of staging burglaries and threatened to break his nose. He has demanded the resignation of town development coordinator Gene Poveromo and vowed to sue him for conspiracy.

Craig has responded publicly with only an occasional formal news release defending his position. "The problem is not with town building inspectors and town planners, which he blames, but with himself," Craig wrote in his most recent news release.

Young has banned Craig from Courtyard property. Neither speaks to the other.

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