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BE OUR GUEST By ROB BOOKMAN

Hands off a New York institution – newsstands

Newsstands are a fixture in this town. They have been featured in countless films and plays, with newsdealers often depicted as a kind of folk hero.

Unless something drastic is done, however, neighborhood newsdealers — many of them immigrants, veterans or disabled entrepreneurs — soon will be hard to find. The city's newsstands are about to be replaced by homogenized kiosks owned by media conglomerates.

The threat to newsstands comes from Local Law 64, aka the street furniture bill. As a result of this bill, the city's 300 newsstands are going to be torn down and replaced by cookie-cutter structures designed to serve primarily as billboards for city-selected advertising and only secondarily as newsstands.

Not only will the newsdealers receive none of the advertising revenue, they will get no compensation for the seizure and destruction of newsstands that have been their property for years. In some cases, the stands have been passed down from generation to generation.

Even worse, the city plans to evict at least 64 newsstands from their present locations, including 49 in Manhattan south of 96th St. Seventy-five percent of the to-be-moved Manhattan stands can't find new spots, and the remainder will die slow deaths after they are relocated to less desirable spots.

In their heyday, the 1940s, the city's newsstands numbered 1,500. Only one-fifth that number remains, but they are an important part of the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers.

We need to remember that not everyone gets the daily newspaper delivered to the door (or doorman). And for

an untold numbers of tourists, the newsdealer is not only a guide for directions, but the quintessential New Yorker, selling candy, dispensing change and providing the latest news. Newsdealers also serve as eyes and ears on the street, a source of safety and a deterrent to crime.

Local Law 64 was a product of the city's desire to reduce the clutter of so-called street furniture as well as provide new public amenities.

If the mayor wants to provide new toilets, bus shelters

and streetlights, great. But the newsstands are not like trash cans that can simply be replaced with new models — they're not even owned by the city!

Thousands of pay phones line city sidewalks and generate hundreds of thousands of dollars in revenue, yet there's no plan to seize these cash cows. Is that because most are owned by corporate giants with powerful lobbyists rather than small businessmen and hardworking families?

The Newsstand Operators Association has filed suit to overturn this unfair and unconstitutional taking of property. We sued in 1998 to overturn a previous version of this law, and we will win again.

Once the courts put a stop to this arrogant, illegal plan, it will be up to the mayor and City Council to come up with something that respects newsdealers' rights to own and operate their stands as they have for decades.

Newsdealers are all for beautifying city streets, but it must be done in a way that serves the interests not just of corporate advertisers, but all New Yorkers.

Bookman is counsel to the New York City Newsstand Operators Association.

**City Hall wants to
seize and tear down
existing stands and
replace them with
cookie-cutter kiosks**
