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200-seat restaurant proposed for vacant space in Nantucket

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31 Easy Street, Nantucket, MA Photo by David Creed

Nantucket, MA The waterfront property at 31 Easy St., near the Steamboat Wharf, has long been the first establishment many people see when they arrive on Nantucket. But the historic building, the former location of Schooner’s restaurant, has been vacant for years as owner Joseph Arno disputed an eminent domain taking attempt by the town. The building was even approved for demolition three years ago, but now a potential revival may be in the works.

The application filed with the planning & land use services office shows the 2,040 s/f building with two floors of dining, as well as patio seating on three sides of the structure. It would once again be called the “Easy Street Restaurant.”

Arno, who has owned the property since the 1970s, has filed for a special permit with the Nantucket Planning Board to reopen a 200-seat restaurant at 31 Easy St.

The plans for a new restaurant at 31 Easy St. filed this month with the Nantucket Planning & Land Use Services office.

The property at 31 Easy St. has been eyed for years by the town, along with the Land Bank and the Steamship Authority. Those entities had been collaborating to secure the property through an acquisition or by eminent domain as a last resort. In a joint statement released in April 2023, the three entities stated it was necessary to acquire the property for a "long-range planning effort to stabilize, protect, and improve the Steamboat Wharf as the gateway entrance to the island for future generations. We strongly believe it is needed to enhance public safety, coastal resilience, and economic security for the next century."

But Arno disputed the acquisition and the potential for an eminent domain taking, calling it "an unprecedented abuse of authority by the Select Board. A precedent would be established to pay unknown millions of dollars to use eminent domain to take commercial properties, not only at Steamboat Wharf, but at Straight Wharf as well."

Island voters initially rejected a warrant article at the 2022 Annual Town Meeting to acquire 31 Easy Street by "purchase, gift or eminent domain for public way, sidewalk, drainage, flood control, coastal resiliency, and transportation and maritime improvements..."

But the same article was brought back in 2023, and this time voters endorsed the acquisition on a vote of 157-101, as town officials called an eminent domain taking an option of "last resort."

Nearly two years have passed since that vote, but it does not appear the town has moved forward with any further negotiations or actions to initiate an eminent domain taking. Select Board chair Brooke Mohr said she was unaware of any ongoing negotiations with Arno. The building at 31 Easy Street was constructed in 1900, making it 125 years old, according to the Nantucket assessor's database. The property is assessed at \$3.97 million.

For many years, the building served as Schooner's restaurant, then the Easy Street Restaurant, but over the past decade it has been mostly vacant other than a few brief stints as a retail outlet, including when TownPool moved in during the summers of 2016 and 2019.

Nearly a century ago, the renowned artist and puppeteer Tony Sarg moved his shop from Centre Street to the building at 31 Easy Street. According to the Nantucket Preservation Trust, "It continued operations there past his death in 1940, until the 1950s...The building was originally constructed as part of the infrastructure of the Nantucket Railroad, and though altered since Sarg's days, the c. 1900 building still maintains many of its characteristic features. Nantucket's National Historic Landmark designation recognizes the importance not only of the island's history as a whaling port, but our development as a heritage tourism destination in the 20th century. 31 Easy Street is a contributing building to our Landmark status and should be preserved."

