

Big Box Holds Community Center

A five-year dispute between L.A. residents and a storage warehouse firm ends in harmony, with the opening of a facility for meetings.

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They were boxed into a corner.

So operators of a self-storage company on Monday ended a five-year fight residents in Glassell Park by converting part of a warehouse that locals call an eyesore into a community center.

It marks a victory for community activists who stubbornly refused to give up their fight against the building for years after it was built.

A 7,400-square-foot section of a controversial three-story storage building will provide space for a hot lunch program for senior citizens and meeting rooms for community groups — some of whose members have vehemently protested the warehouse's existence.

"It's kind of bittersweet," said resident Carol Dal Ponte, whose home overlooks the warehouse. "It's definitely a gift to the community.... [But] we still don't have our hillside view. It's a little like putting earrings on an elephant. We still have an elephant in our midst."

The block-long structure, at 3700 Verdugo Road, has been a source of contention in the hillside neighborhood between Glendale and Mount Washington since late 1999, when it replaced a series of low-slung, garage-like storage rooms.

Calling it "monolithic" and "bigger than the Berlin Wall," residents complained that the concrete structure, which is 46 feet high, dominates the main Glendale Freeway entrance to their community and blocks vistas of nearby hills.

They said Glendale-based Public Storage Inc. had exploited a loophole in the public hearing process to obtain a construction permit for the building from the city of Los Angeles.

After that, Los Angeles leaders tightened their procedures, updated the master plan for Glassell Park and issued interim building controls while new zoning rules for the area were being considered.

But Glassell Park was still left with the hulking structure.

When Public Storage executives recently sought to remodel the interior of the warehouse, city officials advised them to meet with residents to improve their chances of getting a

building permit. That set the stage for a series of meetings that led to the creation of the community center.

About five dozen residents turned out Monday for a preview tour led by city officials and company executives. The locals were pleased.

"It's a big building. But they're using it now in a productive way for the community," said Sonia De Leon Vega, a nearby resident and who is the founder and conductor of the Santa Cecilia Orchestra. "Five years ago it maybe tore the community apart. Now it's bringing it together."

Along with the office and meeting space, the storage company provided 40 parking spaces for the center and donated \$30,000 for furniture and equipment.

City Councilman Eric Garcetti, who represents the Glassell Park area and plans to open a small satellite field office at the new center, acknowledged that emotions ran high when the storage warehouse was first constructed.

"People [went] nuts. This cut off the views of the hillsides. This is the first thing that you see when you exit the freeway. The 'gateway to Glassell Park' was a storage building," he said Monday. The storage company's remodeling request was a chance "to start over."

Jim Fitzpatrick, senior vice president of Public Storage, said a conditional-use permit was required to convert a gymnasium-sized bulk-storage area in the building into smaller individual self-storage rooms.

Fitzpatrick said Garcetti's office brokered the meeting with residents. The meetings were held at the Glassell Park recreation center, next door to the storage building.

"At the first meeting we almost got thrown out," Fitzpatrick said.

The warehouse's proximity to the heavily used recreation center made the community center idea plausible, he said. "The seniors meeting over there have to play dodge ball to get to their meeting room," he explained.

The "one-of-a-kind arrangement" means that the community and the company are "putting past differences behind us," Fitzpatrick said.

After city resolutions were presented and photos of representatives of the Glassell Park Improvement Assn., the Seniors Club and the area's neighborhood council were taken, Santa Cecilia Orchestra cellist Giovahna Moraga and flutist Pamela Vliek serenaded the crowd with classical music.

This is one controversy that ended on a soft note.