

Wesley Heights Residents, Pizzeria Owner Spar Over Liquor License

WASHINGTON - - The 3D Advisory Neighborhood Commission voted Wednesday night to file a protest against the liquor license of a planned Wesley Heights restaurant after a contentious debate.

Restaurant owner Hakan Ilhan and his attorney Michael Fonseca represented the restaurant, Al Forno Pizzeria, at the Oct. 5 meeting. Al Forno is part of a small chain and is slated to move into the vacant building at 3118 New Mexico Ave.

At the meeting, Ilhan and Fonseca sparred with community members and ANC commissioners over a controversial set of regulations designed to limit the restaurant's appeal as a late-night hangout for nearby American University students.

In a private negotiating session several weeks earlier, the ANC had required that Ilhan adopt all of their regulations in order to gain their recommendation for a liquor license. He refused and withdrew from the negotiations, an action he explained at Wednesday's meeting.

"The intent of these regulations is to isolate us, chop us into pieces, and destroy us," Ilhan said, angrily. "They're painting the picture that we were unreasonable and it's not true."

According to 3D08 Commissioner Lee Minichiello, who was the chief ANC negotiator with Al Forno, the approximately 30 regulations included stipulations that the restaurant would not accept EagleBucks, would not sell discount liquor or sliced pizza, and would close at an appropriate hour on weekends.

Local residents, including Michael Mazzuchi of the Wesley Heights Citizens Association and New Mexico Ave. resident Grif Johnson, who designed the regulations with Minichiello, were present at the meeting.

Mazzuchi raised the legacy of Quigley's Restaurant and Saloon, a notoriously rowdy AU bar and hangout on New Mexico Ave. that closed in the late 1990s.

Johnson argued that the regulations were reasonable, and would prevent the neighborhood from having another Quigley's. "Every condition we asked him to accept would have ensured that Al Forno would operate as a family-friendly, neighborhood establishment," Johnson said.

In response, Fonseca charged that the regulations were debilitating, and chose to highlight the case of Chef Geoff's, a restaurant that adjoins the Al Forno lot. Chef Geoff's was given a liquor license without after receiving any regulations from the ANC back in 2000.

"Why wasn't Chef Geoff's required to do any of the stuff Hakan is being required to do?" asked Fonseca. "Like Chef Geoff's, this is not a business that's intended to be a magnet for AU students to the exclusion of the community."

Commission chair Tom Smith took exception to Fonseca's argument and harshly reminded him that, "Just because you have a microphone in front of you doesn't give you control of this meeting."

Smith also expanded on the history of Chef Geoff's liquor license. "Just because we made a mistake [in 2000] doesn't mean we shouldn't perpetuate that mistake," Smith said.

At the end of the debate, Minichiello introduced a resolution to protest the restaurant's liquor license, and it passed 6 to 2, with commissioners Deon T. Jones and W. Phillip Thomas opposed and commissioner Ann Heuer absent.

Ilhan will next have to negotiate an agreement with the D.C. Alcoholic Beverage Regulation Administration, which takes the ANC's suggestions into advisement.

