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WEST ROXBURY

Frustration grows as Irish Social Club members, supporters locked out of meeting

Posted by Matt Rocheleau May 26, 2011 04:35 PM

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

A longtime member of the Irish Social Club of Boston tried to enter the club's West Roxbury facility for a meeting Wednesday evening, but was blocked by club president Andrew Sheehan, who said the meeting was for the club's seven trustee members only.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Frustration boiled over at the [recently closed](#) Irish Social Club of Boston on Wednesday night as members and others advocating for the building's revival were locked out of a club trustees' meeting.

After what was described as a passionate one-and-a-half hour meeting, one of the seven trustees exiting the building said that by a one-vote margin, the group decided "there is merit" to a formal grievance recently filed by some members.

The grievance, mailed May 10 and signed by more than 70 people, including 30-plus members, asserts that the club did not follow proper procedures to close last month under the organization's bylaws.

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It is unclear what will happen next in the dispute, according to trustee and longtime member Richard Byrne. However, club leaders are likely to issue a response and possibly take action related to the grievance.

A letter was also sent asking top club officials to call a meeting of the entire membership. There had been no response to either as of Thursday morning, according to [those organizing to reopen club](#) who have retained their own lawyer to help them.

The club's lawyer, Paul Kilgarriff, has assumed the role of club spokesman since the building closed. He could not immediately be reached Thursday but has said previously that he believes the closure was carried out legitimately.

"There's nothing to hide here," he said [earlier this month](#).

Club leaders have said their ultimate plan is to sell the large, red-brick dance hall building it has owned for three decades. Afterward, club leaders intend to dissolve the 66-year-old organization, which has an aging, dwindling 300-person membership.

The club has been eating into its savings to stay in operation and had an expensive list of needed building repairs, including a seemingly imminent order to upgrade its fire alarm system.

The cost of such an upgrade is expected to represent half of the club's remaining \$30,000 savings. But, advocates for the club's revival say that IBEW Local 103 and Sprinkler Fitters Local 550 have offered to do the labor pro bono.

While trustee Byrne said he feels the building should be sold, he added, "I don't see where the club has to be dissolved. There's no reason."

He also expressed frustration with the closed-door process the club's leadership has taken in making major decisions about the club's future.

"It looks like they can do anything they want to," Byrne said.

As word spread hours beforehand that a meeting had been called, [those campaigning the club be saved](#) planned to attend as a show of support. They hoped to sit in on the meeting, meet directly with the club's president and lawyer and discuss their concerns and ideas for saving the club face-to-face.

It was the first known, official meeting among club leaders since several days before the building held its last dance in mid-April.

Before the meeting began, a few dozen people gathered on the sidewalk outside the club's front entrance along Park Street in West Roxbury. The crowd was led by organizer and club member Kathleen Adams, who passed out green flyers detailing efforts to save the club.

But, the mix of members and other local residents were told by club president Andrew Sheehan and lawyer Kilgarriff that the meeting was only for the club's seven trustees, who are part of the club's 16-member board of directors.

Several members argued they should be allowed to attend as Sheehan partially-opened the club's locked front door to let each of the trustees enter, and at one point the club president physically blocked one longtime member who tried to make his way inside.

"It's disappointing that longtime members and some potential new members weren't given a chance to observe the meeting," said District 6 City Councilor

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Matt O'Malley outside the club. "We've heard they closed because they felt there wasn't enough interest, but one thing we've seen over the last month is there's great interest."

"Clearly people feel very strongly about this club," he added. "And, I hope those inside would be sensitive to those outside."

O'Malley, At-large City Councilor John Connolly, State Senator Michael Rush, and State Representative Ed Coppinger have expressed support and been working to keeping the club intact.

At the request of Coppinger, whose parents are longtime members, the state attorney general's office has been looking into whether the club followed proper procedure to close.

As Sheehan exited the club where a small crowd remained, he did not acknowledge requests for comment. Kilgariff only said his next step is to meet with Coppinger.

Coppinger said Thursday he wanted to meet with Kilgariff to explain the community process the club would have to go through in order to sell the building. He said a potential buyer of the space would likely want to change its use, which may prove challenging because such a change would require residents' support through the city's approval process.

Meanwhile, club members revived their time-honored Sunday-night dance this past weekend – the first event since their building closed over a month ago. Instead of gathering at the usual space, they met at Florian Hall in Dorchester.

"Large crowd at Florian Hall Sun[day] evening, mostly [Irish] Social Club members," wrote one woman on the [Facebook page](#) advocating the club be saved. "Excellent music and camaraderie, we missed the free coffee"

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at mjrochele@gmail.com.



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