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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

Meeting set to discuss proposal to expand Russian bar, restaurant in Allston

Posted by Matt Rocheleau March 29, 2013 07:16 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A proposal to increase the capacity of a Russian bar and restaurant in a building at the corner of Linden and Cambridge streets in Allston has drawn some community concern.

But a lawyer for the establishment said he believes most of the worry is due to misconceptions about the proposal and that a meeting has been scheduled to clarify the plan.

The Russian Benevolent Society is seeking city approval to increase the capacity of Crystal Restaurant, which is housed on the ground-floor space inside one of two buildings at 14-20 Linden St.

The proposal calls for increasing the capacity from 299 to 450 and to add capacity for 90 people on an outdoor patio, said the society's Framingham-based attorney Richard Vetstein.

He said the capacity change coincides with the society's plans to expand the

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He said the capacity change coincides with the society's plans to expand the establishment into an abutting abandoned commercial garage.

The garage would become a 3,600-square-foot room that could be used separately from, or in conjunction with, the existing main restaurant space, which is about 5,240 square feet. Vetstein said the society primarily intends to use the expansion to host smaller functions.

The society already has a license to host live entertainment in the main room. In its pending request before the city, the society is also seeking permission to for live entertainment to be allowed in the addition.

Vetstein said there was some worry the restaurant was trying to become a nightclub or that its expansion might create noise or other nuisances that will spill over into nearby residential areas.

But, he said, the building is separated from homes by the Massachusetts Turnpike and a newly-abandoned rail yard. And, Vetstein said there is no plan for the establishment to run like a nightclub.

The establishment does have a license to serve beer, wine and liquor seven days a week, but the license stipulates that alcohol must be served with food, which Vetstein said the society does not want to change.

"It's a very traditional-style Russian restaurant and function space," he said. "There's a misconception that Russians are sitting there swilling vodka. That's not the case at all. It's Russian tradition that alcohol is served with meals. They eat probably more than they drink."

"People have been saying this is going to become a nightclub, but it's not. Nightclubs don't typically serve food," he added.

The establishment opened eight years ago as a private social club at first and later received city permission to open to the public. Vetstein said the venue has typically hosted events like family gatherings and weddings and has never had problems with neighbors before.

"If you were walking by, you probably wouldn't even know it's there," he said.

But, he said it's an important social space for local Russians.

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“It really is one of the only Russian restaurants around in the area,” he said.

In recent months, a [website](#), [Facebook page](#) and [Twitter account](#) were created saying that an upscale “supper club” called Garage Lounge was preparing to soon open permanently at 20 Linden St.

The website and two social media pages were all deactivated within three days after Boston.com first published a [story](#) mentioning and linking to them. The site and pages had displayed information, photos and videos showing that some parties have already been held, dating as far back as this past New Year’s Eve.

Vetstein described that web presence as “a marketing tool to host some one-night events.”

He said he did not believe the effort is a permanent marketing strategy, but, added: “I’m not sure how they’ll market it,” in the future.

Representatives for the society went before the city’s Zoning Board of Appeals Tuesday for a scheduled hearing, but asked that the board defer the hearing several weeks to allow the society to meet with a community group to address concerns raised recently by residents, according to a spokesman for the board.

The zoning board voted unanimously to approve the society’s request to defer the hearing, the spokesman said.

The society’s request has been rescheduled to be heard at 11:30 a.m. on Tuesday, May in room 801 of City Hall. The society’s proposal may require approval from other city boards and departments, officials said.

Vetstein said the society had met with one neighborhood group, the Allston Civic Association, twice before Tuesday’s hearing at City Hall, and that that group supported the proposal.

But, he said several days before the hearing, another group of residents began to voice concerns. So, the society decided to hold a meeting with that group before asking the city to approve its request.

“We were frankly so surprised it got so much controversy,” said Vetstein. “I think there’s some misconceptions. But, we’re going to try to meet with

everyone to address and respond to neighbors' concerns."

He said, with help from city officials, a public meeting about the proposal has been scheduled for 6 p.m. on April 9 at the Jackson Mann School in Allston.

Along with the restaurant, the pair of two-story brick buildings at 14-20 Linden Street also house offices, a fitness center, bakery, an adult daycare facility and an art studios. Vetstein said none of the other spaces on the property would be affected by the restaurant's proposed expansion.

The 14-20 Linden St. property is comprised of two parcels measuring a total of about 1.3 acres and assessed by the city as being worth about \$5.6 million.

The property is owned by Partners Properties, LLC, which bought the site for \$4.8 million in 2003, city and state records show.

Partners Properties is owned by Adrian Shapiro, of Newton, who is also a treasurer and secretary for the Russian Benevolent Society, according to state records.

Alex Matov, the society's president, owns, manages and invests in several area businesses, including some that are listed as being based inside 14-20 Linden St.

Vetstein said the building's owners have invested heavily to rehabilitate the site's old commercial buildings.

"These guys have poured millions of dollars into this complex to make it what it is now," he said. "It used to be an eyesore. But now it's thriving with a diverse mix of businesses."

Local blogs, including [Universal Hub](#), [Allston Brighton Newsflash](#) and the [Allston Brighton Community Blog](#), have also written about the society's proposal.

This story was updated Saturday, March 30 to note that the Garage Lounge website and social media pages have been deactivated.

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