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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

Russian bar in Allston to rethink 'Garage Lounge' name after

By Matt Rocheleau

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Owners of a Russian bar and restaurant in Allston agreed to consider changing the name and marketing of a recent addition to their establishment after neighbors raised concern that the new venue's portrayal might attract an unwanted crowd.

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ALLSTON-BRIGHTON REAL ESTATE

The Crystal Restaurant at the corner of Linden and Cambridge streets recently converted an unused garage into a 3,600 square-foot addition to the main restaurant and bar area, which is about 5,240 square feet, according to Alex Matov, a manager for the establishment and president of the Russian Benevolent Society, which owns it.

To go with the expansion, the establishment plans to ask the city's zoning board to increase its indoor capacity from 320 to 360 and to add a seasonal patio with a 90-person capacity. Management for the bar and restaurant met with about a dozen neighbors at the Jackson Mann School Tuesday night to address concerns and try to gain more support before going before the zoning board.

The new space, called Garage Lounge Boston, would be used by people who want to rent out a smaller space than the main dining area, which Matov said has been a frequent request.

It would primarily be used for banquets, dinners, weddings, anniversaries and family events the restaurant has traditionally hosted, he said. The establishment will continue to cater to "upscale clientele," enforcing a dress code and selling food and drinks at "high-end" prices, including tables for \$300 to \$750 each, Matov said.

Matov said he said the Russian Benevolent Society board would try to come up with several alternative names.

An event promoter came up with Garage Lounge, he said.

The names have been advertised in recent months on a website, Facebook page and Twitter account describing Garage Lounge as an upscale "supper club." The sites and web pages were created and managed by the event promoter, restaurant management has said.

The website and two social media pages were all deactivated within three days after Boston.com 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.

But Matov told residents that contrary to some of the early marketing and portrayal of the new room, it will not be a nightclub. He cited how the establishment is only permitted to serve alcohol with food and is not seeking

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permission to change that or to stay open past its current closing time of 1 a.m.

“It’s not going to be what you think it’s going to be,” said Richard Vetstein, a lawyer for the establishment.

“Unlike in American culture, we never drink without eating,” Matov added.

Both Vetstein and Matov said there has been **some confusion** and inaccurate rumors over the establishment’s expansion.

Some of the confusion came from the event promoter’s online presence as well as from a filing with the city that describes the establishment is seeking a greater capacity increase than owners actually want. The establishment’s management is working with city officials to fix that discrepancy.

The expansion proposal has also drawn concern because the establishment has been cited twice by the city in the past two months.

In February, city inspectors found the establishment had illegally provided bottle service and had used the new Garage Lounge room in February, despite being warned days earlier by the chair of the city’s licensing board not to do so, according to police testimony at a **city hearing Tuesday morning**. The bar was also illegally selling homemade bottles of cranberry vodka and did not have an adequate number of exits in the new room.

Matov apologized.

“I take complete blame,” he said. “It was a pure misunderstanding. It’s not going to happen again.”

On March 8 at about 1 a.m., a man reported to police that another man inside the establishment pushed him and head-butted him. When the two men went outside, the man said he was repeatedly punched and kicked by the same man and several other men, according to a police report. He was later diagnosed with a concussion.

That report was read aloud at Tuesday night’s meeting by Boston Police Sergeant Michael O’Hara.

He said the establishment was not cited at all during 2012.

Still, O'Hara expressed concern on behalf of Boston Police about the restaurant and bar's proposed capacity increase. He said that there have been numerous capacity increases approved for other nightlife venues in Allston-Brighton. Each capacity increase, puts additional strain on police, he said.

"We don't have a lot of manpower," he said. "There are problems at all of these liquor establishments no matter how well they are managed.

O'Hara said the area around that part of Linden Street is busy for police. It is comprised primarily of off-campus homes and apartments housed by college students and some Greek life houses. Officers and some in the neighborhood call it "the GAP," a name derived from the first letters of three successive streets, Gardner, Ashford and Pratt.

"We spend a lot of time down there responding to parties," he said.

He noted how there have been numerous problems there in recent months, including assaults, hazing incidents, robberies, and a 19-year-old college student found dead outside of a party in March and a 21-year-old college student stabbed to death on New Year's Eve.

Police have been particularly busy responding to burglaries in Allston and Brighton, which have more than doubled so far this year compared to this time last year, O'Hara said.

The establishment opened eight years ago as a private Russian social club at first and later received city permission to open to the public. The vast majority of people who go there are of Russian descent, owners said.

Leaders of the Russian Benevolent Society own the two former warehouse buildings at 14-20 Linden St. The complex includes the restaurant and bar, offices rented to various businesses, a fitness center, bakery, an adult daycare facility and an art studios. None of the other businesses would be affected by the expansion plan.

Leaders of the society also recently bought two homes that abut each other and the business complex.

An entity run by Matoy and Adrian Shapiro, his business partner and a fellow

director of the society, paid \$900,000 to buy 8-10 Pratt St. in February and \$700,000 to buy 24 Linden St., state land records show.

Matov said the purchases were made so that the business complex would have more room to expand its parking lot, but he assured neighbors Tuesday that the houses will be renovated, not torn down, and that he will carefully screen for responsible tenants.

A few residents expressed support for the expansion proposal.

“If we want to brand Allston as more than college party town central we have to bring in new businesses. Right now there are too any establishments that cater specifically to that group,” said Joan Pasquale, a 40-plus year neighborhood resident and executive director of the nonprofit Parents and Community Build Group and the Ringer Park Partnership Group.

She said does not want to see the unique character and flavor of Allston change, but said the neighborhood should welcome businesses that have a more upscale focus to create better balance.

“We need change,” Pasquale said. “This is an opportunity for that change.”

The city’s board of appeals is scheduled to hear the bar’s expansion request at 11:30 a.m. on Tuesday, May 7 in room 801 of City Hall. The proposal may require approval from other city boards and departments, officials said.

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