

As Patio Theater seeks liquor license, neighbors are wary

BY GRACE WONG
Chicago Tribune

For many longtime residents, the Patio Theater is where they saw their first movie. It's where they were awestruck by its intricate architecture and elaborate decorations, and in a mostly working-class community, the theater has been an affordable getaway and a treasured neighborhood landmark.

Over the years, the theater — at 6008 W. Irving Park Road in the Portage Park neighborhood — has become mostly vacant and fallen into disrepair, the vibrant colors on the walls faded and auditorium seats dusty and worn.

Enter the Portage Theater Group, a company that operates two other theaters: the Portage Theater, also in Portage Park, and the Olympic Theater in Cicero. With

promises to revamp the old theater into a vibrant performance venue, the group began operating the Patio Theater in 2015.

But neighbors have been trying to halt the group's efforts to get a liquor license and submitted hundreds of letters against the application to the liquor commissioner, saying the building owner has a negative reputation and the entertainment the group has offered so far, like a burlesque show, isn't what they want for their community.

At a community meeting in March, residents said they didn't trust building owner Eddie Carranza because of past violations at his other theater properties, but according to documents obtained by the Tribune, violations involving the Congress Theater and the Portage Theater were withdrawn.

After that meeting, Carranza said residents' anger was "misdirected" and that he has no oversight of the programming.

"We first buy the property and then we invite developers to come in and invest and partner in the property," he said. "I'm just a building owner."

The liquor license application was denied last month, and Ald. Nicholas Sposato, 38th, and Charlie Burns, the theater operator, are now trying to come to a consensus on a plan of operations. Sposato said that after he approves the plan, it returns to the liquor commission for approval.

"You're kind of halfway in between keeping the neighbors happy and the surrounding businesses and the alderman," Burns said. "When we're done here, hopefully it all comes out positive and we can keep



JOSE M. OSORIO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

City officials denied a liquor license last month for the Patio Theater. Ald. Nicholas Sposato and the theater operator have been meeting to find consensus on a new proposal.

this theater running for a hundred years. That's our ultimate goal."

Burns noted that 200 letters supported the liquor license, but that they were sent to the liquor commissioner too late. "A lot of people are in support, but obviously there are a few people with concerns, and we're just going to have to prove ourselves that we're going to run a responsible theater," he said.

Sposato said Burns is supposed to submit a final plan of operations that meets all the criteria discussed during their first meeting, including parking, renovation, security and programming. While Sposato thought the meeting went well, he still has his doubts. "We just have reason to believe that they don't have the resources to do what they need to do," Sposato said Wednesday.

Melissa Basilone, a business owner who owns a thrift store and a coffee shop on the same block as the theater, said the community is "hungry for some kind of cultural activity" and that many people are optimistic about the theater as long as it sticks to the plan of operations.

"The older community is concerned about the liquor license because they're afraid and worried about the late-night shows and



Neighbors have been trying to halt the Portage Theater Group's efforts to get a liquor license for the Patio Theater.

people stumbling around their lawn and puking in their gardens," she said. "If programming is films and stand-up comedy, I don't think it will be an issue."

In March, the Portage Theater Group held a community meeting regarding the application for a liquor license. In its presentation, attended by more than 200 people, the theater group detailed a security and safety plan, family-friendly programming and the economic impact.

Ed Bannon, 45, from Dunning, who has been outspoken on the issue and his distrust of Carranza, said Thursday that he has his reservations but is hoping to speak with the alderman. However, since the hiring of Dennis Wolkowicz — former manager of the Portage Theater and some-

one Bannon knows — Bannon has become more confident in the operators.

"(Wolkowicz) has been in the theater business for years, and he has the connections with the studios for movies and to get good responsible security teams," Bannon said. "He didn't turn the Portage into a huge nightclub — that only happened after he left."

Bannon said Wolkowicz's hiring is a "good sign" that the operators will be a good business neighbor.

Wolkowicz "is not going to be involved in events or a general atmosphere that will have a negative impact on the surrounding community, including the business community," Bannon said.

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