

Residents dispute liquor at McLoone's Fords location

Upscale eatery would be part of off-track wagering facility

BY KATHY CHANG

From the Edison, NJ, Sentinel

WOODBIDGE - Many residents said they didn't mind restaurateur Timothy McLoone bringing in lobster Wellington and pistachio-encrusted halibut at his new McLoone's location at Favorites in Fords, but they questioned the need for a liquor license at the restaurant.

"I have gone to Mr. McLoone's two restaurants and they are wonderful, but the difference is you can place bets [at the Fords restaurant]" said Iselin resident Reverie Delmundo at the public forum on the transfer of the liquor license at the off-track wagering facility, held July 31 in council chambers. "I cannot get over a child getting injured by an angry drunk speeding down Fords Avenue. That is a problem."

The New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority (NJSEA) has entered into an agreement with McLoone, who is the owner of McLoone's Riverside in Sea Bright and McLoone's Pier House in Long Branch, both in Monmouth County, to operate a food and beverage service called McLoone's at Favorites at its off-track wagering [OTW] facility, which is expected to open in mid September. Since April 2006, the NJSEA has canvassed vendors from various major chains including T.G.I. Friday, Chili's Grill & Bar, and Houlihan restaurants.

Township officials are waiting to receive the results of the background checks from the FBI on the stakeholder (McLoone) of McLoone Holdings Co. LLC. After the township receives the background checks from the FBI, the police department can make its final recommendations to approve or deny the liquor license transfer from the family ownership, JRC Associates, of The Club at Woodbridge, which no longer uses its license. Then the Township Council, which acts as the local Alcoholic Beverage Control [ABC] governing board, will vote to approve or deny the transfer. Iselin resident Paul Danielczyk questioned if it would be a conflict of interest if any council member is a member of The Club at Woodbridge.

Ken Nowak, an Alcoholic Beverage Control attorney for the township, said if there were a conflict of interest then the council member would not vote. McLoone's at Favorites consists of 23,000 square feet. The food and beverage portion of the facility is approximately 14,000 square feet and will consist of a kitchen and kitchen storage area, main dining area, bar area, dining areas adjacent to the bar area and an NJSEA VIP room. There will be 387 seats available for the food and beverage area. There are 366 planned parking spaces. Helen Doyle, project manager for the restaurant, said the restaurant's employees would be in control of the entire food and beverage business.

"We will have a food menu similar to our other two restaurants," she said.

"We haven't explored having similar types of bands [which McLoone described as old-fashioned bands, at his other two restaurants]," she said. "We want to see what the neighborhood is looking for."

McLoone, who came to the meeting with Doyle and Tim McMahon, the restaurant's director of operations, said the tentative hours of operation would be from 11:30 a.m. to 2 a.m. and said the OTW would close at midnight.

McLoone, who said his choice to partner with NJSEA was in part to help pay for his child's college education, said all his restaurants bring the concept of "upscale dining for the entire family."

"I can understand why people might be nervous of the off-track wagering facility because of the off-track betting [OTB] facilities in New York," he said.

"But that is not the case in New Jersey," he said. "We were recruited by the NJSEA because we are family oriented and can cater to all ages."

McLoone said there would be video screens, but there would be a separate entrance into the restaurant facing Fords Avenue.

“Patrons can come with their family and enjoy a burger and not know that there is gambling going on,” he said.

McLoone said the food business at his other two restaurants have outweighed his beverage business, with 80 percent for food and 20 percent for beverages.

“At first, when we opened our first restaurant, we thought it was going to be 50 percent for food and 50 percent for beverages,” he said. “I don’t know how it is going to be at this restaurant, but we have been in business for over 20 years and we know how to do it right.”

Carole Mayti, who has voiced her opposition to the OTW over the past year, asked McLoone to keep “the drunks from leaving his facility.” McLoone reassured residents that his establishment would not serve alcohol to intoxicated patrons.

“These patrons would be carefully taken care of,” he said.

McLoone said his entire staff is TIPS [Training for Intervention Procedures] certified. The TIPS program is a skills-based training program that is designed to prevent intoxication, underage drinking and drunken driving.

“In our 23 years in business, we have not gotten one liquor license complaint,” said McLoone. “We don’t serve shots or hold bachelor parties, because it makes business revenue disappear. We have old-fashioned bands play at the other two restaurants.”

The 30 or so residents who came to the public forum said they were worried about the mix between gambling and alcohol, and urged the council to make the right decision.

“Alcohol loosens people up and leads to people spending more than they intend,” said Hopelawn resident Paul Lund Jr., who is seeking a three-year council term as a Republican in November.

Danielczyk added that mixing gambling and alcohol was like mixing ammonia with bleach, which makes it combustible.

Christopher Struben, who is also seeking a three-year council term as a Republican this November, said the council has the opportunity to right the wrong in this particular situation.

“The board can deny the liquor license on the fact that there is a saturation of liquor licenses in a two-mile radius,” said Struben. “Also, the board can deny it by the close proximity to schools and residences.”

Township Municipal Clerk John Mitch said that since the liquor license was being transferred, it does not fall under the local ordinance for new liquor licenses that requires it to be 1,000 feet away from a school. Under federal law, a liquor license can’t be within 200 feet of a school or a church. Council President Brenda Velasco said [the liquor license] would be 2,325 feet from the nearest school and 625 feet from where the children wait for the school bus. Fords resident James Sanfilippo said the OTW and the McLoone’s at Favorites restaurant would be an asset to Fords.

The NJSEA is spending \$6 million to turn the old A&P store at the intersection of Fords Avenue and Lafayette Road into a state-of-the-art off-track wagering facility. Sanfilippo said the people should not be afraid of progress.

“If you don’t like it, don’t walk in,” he said. “And for the people worried about the children, there [are] children everywhere. We have to stop this nonsense; we need progress, face the fact.”

Fords resident John Coyle said he is leaning toward supporting the liquor license, and that the upscale restaurant would improve the area.

“I moved here with my family in 1998, and that shopping center has not changed since,” said Coyle. “There’s really no where to go in Fords.”