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A Twist in U Street's Revival; Officials, Businesses Clash Over Regulations; [FINAL Edition]

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Want to open a bar near trendy U Street, build some apartments or add a room to your house? There's a group with enough clout to alter your plans. You'll need to ask their blessing.

Things don't always go smoothly. Mesfin Tessema, the owner of U-Turn at 11th and U in Northwest, found that out last week when he sought permission to put four or five sidewalk tables outside his place to draw more customers.

No sooner had he made the request at a meeting of the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1B than Dee Hunter, who chairs the 11-member body, had Tessema on his heels, listing all the reasons the commission didn't think he deserved special consideration.

"There was an allegation of a shooting that was tied to an event at this establishment less than a year ago," said Hunter, who also recalled an affront from early last month, when he left an ANC meeting after 10 p.m. "The window [at U-Turn] was open, and noise could be heard coming from the window."

Permission denied.

It doesn't take violence to lose ANC support. Alero Restaurant, seeking more outside tables, also was disappointed. And the commission declined to support a liquor license for a proposed Duffy's Irish Restaurant on Vermont Avenue.

As the corridor reclaims its historic role as a vibrant and trendy place to eat, dance and be merry, businesses that serve alcohol are being told, in no uncertain terms, that violence, excessive noise and any undue late-night clanking of forks will not be tolerated.

"There's a new sheriff in town," said Hunter, who lives just off U Street and has frequented many of the local establishments. "We're going to take a hard look at businesses that have a negative impact on the people that live near them."

Final approval of licenses and permits rests with various city agencies. But ANC support is helpful, and the recent turnabout is drastic. In its previous incarnation, ANC 1B was eager to promote liquor licenses in an attempt to revive nightlife in an area roughly bounded by S, Harvard, Second and 16th streets. But eight new commissioners won seats last fall.

The group supports the effort by Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) and council member Jim Graham (D-Ward 1) to revoke the liquor license of Club U in the Reeves Municipal Center, after one of its patrons, the victim of a stabbing, died just outside the club in February. A hearing to determine the club's fate continues today before the city's liquor board, which rarely revokes licenses.

Two former ANC commissioners, Lawrence Guyot and Sinclair Skinner, contend that black

owners and establishments that cater to black people -- Club U and U-Turn included -- are being targeted. "What has evolved is a racial attack on black liquor- license owners, usually led by Jim Graham," Guyot said. Fliers have been posted in the U Street and Columbia Heights areas that show a caricature of Graham -- "Gramzilla" -- in the process of tearing down businesses.

"Politicians take the worst of our situation and blow it up politically to justify a club closing," said Skinner, who owns a dry cleaners on Georgia Avenue. "It's bigger than the club and it's bigger than a single death."

Graham said there's nothing to their claims. "This has nothing to do with race," he said.

What is has to do with is maintaining order, according to Graham and members of ANC 1B, most of whom support closing Club U in the Reeves Center, which houses several key city agencies and, during the day, about 1,000 employees.

Scott Pomeroy, executive director of 14th & U Main Street Alliance, said his group has met separately with residents and business owners to try to broker constructive resolutions. There are blacks and whites on either side of the argument, some who want peace and quiet and others who are happy amid the sirens and the hustle and bustle of the club scene.

Lauren and Shel West, who live at the Ellington on U Street between 13th and 14th streets, said they knew what they were getting. From the 450-square-foot balcony of their seventh-floor apartment, they have panoramic views of the city. The noise "is part of what I expect to [find] in the city," said Lauren West. "I don't have any issue with the clubs."

But Commissioner Philip Spaulding said the ANC often hears from people who don't feel that way. He has lived in the city for a decade, the last five years near 13th and U. The goal, he said, is not to drive business away, but "I want those that are here to behave."

The operators of Club U and U-Turn contend that they have tried to do just that. Warren Williams Jr., who owns Club U with his father, said the city was within its rights to suspend the club's liquor license after the killing in February.

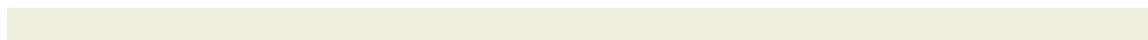
"We deserved that," he said in an interview. "I would expect the same to happen anywhere someone dies."

What he can't accept, he said, is the idea that he and his father are running some type of wild establishment with no concern for its patrons or the surrounding community.

The club has three levels of security, Williams said, and for years has asked police to assign a detail to the club and to improve security for the entire Reeves Center. In addition, he said, he and his father have always tried to donate space and food to community groups.

Tessema, the owner of U-Turn, said his club also has been a good neighbor, opening in its location more than five years ago, before the street had been revitalized.

"We helped clean up U Street," he said. "We should get some credit for that. Now that it's changed, people are saying, 'You have to go.' That's not fair."



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