

Queen/Beaconsfield Residents Association News

Sept 28, 2005

Unit (New Bar at 1198): New Bar Approved Despite Objections from Residents and Councillor

There is news regarding the new bar (Unit) at 1198 Queen West.

As you may recall, there were numerous letters sent to the councillor's office, and a phone conference was held w. the AGCO (The Ontario licencing board).

In the conference call, a number of residents and the city councillor's office all agreed that a new bar would not be in the interest of the neighbourhood, and all agreed that if a licence were granted it all, it should require, at least initially, that the bar not operate beyond 11:00 pm at night. While the owner maintained it was more of a café than a bar, he expressed a preference to stay open until 2:00.

The AGCO representative said there were three possible outcomes: the licence might be granted, or might be granted with conditions, or that further public input might be solicited at hearings.

The AGCO representative also said we would receive news within a week or so. This was in July. After a few months of chasing we got news today, around 10 weeks later.

The AGCO sent me an email saying they approved the licence, with conditions. The "conditions" they listed were not what was discussed at the meeting, and are comparably minimal in their impact. I quote these from the email I got from the AGCO, with my own comments:

Condition #1: No speakers on the patio or outside the premise.

It seems crazy that speakers would be allowed outside the premise to start with. The Beaconsfield, which was of course a huge source of noise trouble for a long time, managed to make all this noise without ever having speakers outside.

Condition #2 No dance floor.

The place is small, and the floor plans indicate they never planned or wanted a dance floor. (The Beac never had a dance floor either, but that didn't stop them from playing music at dance-club volumes).

Condition #3: Notification of any expansion of the licensed premise will be given to the city councillor and the Queen/Beaconsfield residents association.

Presumably this information would be available to us anyhow. Expansions of licenced premises require public postings.

Condition #4: A contact number will be provided to the Queen/Beaconsfield residents association.

Um... Great.

The AGCO laws say they do not issue licences in cases where it is not in the interest of the community. They also say they are not in a position to make this judgment themselves, deferring to the residents and their elected city councillors.

In this case, several residents, and the office of their city councillor, all agreed that a new bar, open late, would not be in the interest of the community. The AGCO issued the licence anyhow, without even bothering to conduct further consultation.

The guy who runs Unit seems nice, and there's no reason to suspect anything but the best of intentions on his part. Still: this is the fifth bar to be opened, re-opened, or licenced, in under two years, within two blocks of the corner of Queen and Beaconsfield. This brings the total bars in this very small area to seven (The Social, Lot 16, The Drake, The Beaconsfield, The Dome, Unit, The Gladstone), with a total capacity of around 1375. Just as it's clear that one or two bars in an area are a great thing, promote mixed use, etc, it's equally clear that too many bars, especially when they're all added rapidly, are really bad for a neighbourhood. For this reason, many cities have limits on bar density. Toronto and Ontario do not have any such regulations.

As I've pointed out many times before, the bar density in our neighbourhood exceeds what would be allowed in many other places, including New York City. This is an incredibly rapid acceleration of bar density in a neighbourhood, with a licensing agency that seems dramatically unresponsive to resident concerns.

Neighbours meet with Drake

Bob Dann, Marc Lemyre, and Linda America met with Bill Simpson (General Manager) and Jeff Stober (owner) at the Drake Hotel, to discuss noise issues. Everyone described this initial meeting as amicable, professional, and encouraging.

The noise from the Drake's rooftop patio is sometimes very loud. Also, some neighbours are disturbed by the noise from their sidewalk café, including the increasing trend this summer of having live musical acts on the sidewalk café. It's worth noting that municipal law prohibits *any* music on the sidewalk café at any time. Even playing music indoors with the windows open is a violation of the bylaw.

The Drake agreed to try and minimize these disturbances. They will no longer book musical acts on the patio, and will try to minimize other noise. They will meet again with group representatives in a week or so to check in on progress.

The Drake have also expressed an interest in working with the group on other matters, and in involving themselves in neighbourhood initiatives.

If you have any specific incidents or concerns about the Drake, please let me know.

Updates on the Beaconsfield

The Beaconsfield continues to be *much* quieter than they were a few months ago. It's worth remembering that had things proceeded without the intervention of the group, it's very likely that the Beac would still be playing music at deafening volumes most nights, with the doors open, and would now also have a patio with a licenced capacity of 120.

The current patio seems to mostly be going well. A lot of members of the residents group are now regular customers at the patio. The relation between residents and the Beac, once generally pretty tense, are now pretty friendly. This is, of course, great!

At the same time, the Beaconsfield's compliance with the terms to which they agreed are sometimes a bit of a problem. They still often play music with the doors open, which they promised not to do. While they promised to put up several prominently-placed signs reminding customers to be quiet outside, they in fact posted just one sign, a week or so ago, which is a piece of paper taped to window a little above knee level. The music, while much better than it used to be, is still often louder than the agreement proposed. And the layout of the patio is not quite what was agreed on.

A few of us are discussing these issues with the Beaconsfield. We are trying to resolve them while also respecting the large amount of genuine effort and goodwill on the Beac's part in the past couple of months.

If you have any specific incidents or concerns about the Beaconsfield, I'd very much like to hear them.

Construction/Development

There has been little if any news about the proposed large towers being proposed on Abell and Queen St. We'll continue to keep an eye on this issue, and if there are residents who are especially concerned about it, it might be worth forming a separate subcommittee on the matter.

This issue, I suspect, is much bigger than our group- It's not just residents, but businesses and property-owners who are very concerned about these developments, possibly in a larger area, too, than our group covers.

I've spoken informally with Christina Zeidler at the Gladstone Hotel. She is very concerned about these developments, and may be taking steps in the next few months to try and organize more neighbourhood input into the matter.

Formalizing and expanding the group

Slowly, slowly, we are working toward formalizing and expanding the group, to give it more legitimacy and to try to better represent the diversity of opinions among neighbourhood residents. There's a subcommittee to work on this, and we'll be meeting this Thursday. If you're not part of that group and you're interested in helping, let me know.

Block Party/Yard Sale

There's a lot of in the idea of a big neighbourhood event, like a yard sale or block party. I gather Matt and Samantha have been looking into this a bit, but that there hasn't been a lot of concrete action yet.