

Fairfax theater's application for liquor license kicks up controversy



Fairfax Theatre 6 on Broadway would be the 34th business in town with a liquor license if its application is approved. (IJ file photo)

By Richard Halstead

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Fairfax is abuzz over a plan to sell alcohol at the movie theater.

David Corkill, owner of the Fairfax Theatre 6, said he wants to begin selling beer and wine at the six-screen theater in addition to installing luxury reclining seating and an expanded food menu. Corkill said he needs to update his business to remain competitive in an increasingly competitive entertainment marketplace that allows people to live-stream videos from the comfort of their living rooms.

"Movie theater attendance has been declining annually for a number of years," Corkill said. "We're simply trying to upgrade our theater to offer what today's moviegoers want."

A number of Fairfax residents, however, have recoiled at the idea of alcohol being served in their local movie theater. They say there are already far too many local businesses reliant on alcohol sales. There are 33 businesses with licenses to sell alcohol in Fairfax.

Councilwoman Renee Goddard said emails started pouring in shortly after the license application was posted publicly. Goddard said so far Fairfax Town Manager Garrett Toy has received about 100 emails on the subject.

“Three of the 100 letters, last I checked, were in support of the application, and 97 were opposed,” Goddard said.

The Town Council has decided to host a community forum to discuss the proposal at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Women’s Club building. The council, however, has little or no say on whether the state issues the license.

Several formal protests of the application have already been submitted to the state’s Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, which issues liquor licenses, and the public comment period is still open.

John Carr, a spokesman for the regulatory agency, said, “We have to review the letters to make sure they are valid protests under the application guidelines to determine if there should be a hearing or not.”

If the protests are deemed valid, a hearing will be conducted before an administrative law judge.

Corkill said he is making similar changes at the Tiburon Playhouse, and was able to secure a liquor license there without facing any opposition. He said many movie theaters across the country are selling alcohol, some even sell spirits.

Corkill said the concern in Fairfax was ignited by David Finnane, principal of White Hill Middle School.

“I sent emails to my personal friends on my Yahoo email list about my concern about this application,” Finnane said. “The community needs to get educated to the fact that we have alcohol appearing pretty much in every venue and activity that our kids are involved in.”

Finnane serves on the board of the Ross Valley Healthy Community Collaborative, which has also encouraged members of the community to oppose the liquor license. Joining Finnane on the board is Goddard, San Anselmo Mayor John Wright, and Sir Francis Drake High School principal Liz Seabury.

“Our whole mission is to educate our community about the pretty disconcerting statistics about alcohol and drug use in our community with our youth,” Finnane said.

Michael Scippa, director of public affairs for Alcohol Justice, a San Rafael advocacy group that works to prevent alcohol abuse, said movie theaters across the country are moving to sell alcohol.

“It’s a rather disturbing trend, and it’s certainly not exclusive to Marin County or California,” Scippa said.

And Scippa said movie theaters aren’t the only businesses moving in this direction. A bill pending before the state Assembly would permit barbershops and beauty parlors to serve alcohol without a liquor license.

“Everybody wants to serve alcohol,” Scippa said. “Everybody wants to take advantage of people who have been programmed by the industry’s incessant marketing that you can’t enjoy a single activity without a drink in your hand.”

Corkill, however, said underage minors would not be served in his theater.

“We would choose when we put a movie into our theater whether or not we’re going to allow alcohol consumption in that movie depending on what the movie content is,” Corkill said. “If it’s a children’s movie we don’t want alcohol in that auditorium.

“We’re not at all interested in promoting the consumption of alcohol by youths. We’re 100 percent opposed to it.”

Goddard said, “We do not want to push him away. He has been a generous and very eco-minded businesses owner.”

She said her hope is that conditions can be placed on the liquor license that will both satisfy critics and allow the theater to prosper.