

2.10.2020 | Alta Via (Big Burrito Restaurant Group) - Community Meeting

Approximately 25 people in attendance.

Project Introduction: This project is going through both the zoning board of adjustments and the PA liquor control board. Zoning hearing is 2/13 at 9 a.m. at 200 Ross Street. Seeking special exception for use as restaurant general and variance for parking (need 7 spaces; providing 2).

Big Burrito: Kaya, Casbah, Eleven, Soba, Umi, Alta Via, Big Catering, Mad Mex.

Bill Fuller – President of the company and chef.

Keith Lawrence – Facilities and Construction Director

Alta Via opened in April near Fox Chapel. Always been interested in Lawrenceville and had the right opportunity. Exciting neighborhood and hope to be a part of it. We're restaurant operators; high quality food and doing something interesting and unique. Bill will explain more about the concept. We hope to separate ourselves from others doing pizza and we spent a lot of time developing this concept. The other thing we focus on is design: look and feel. We have our architects here so they're going to talk a little bit about the space and the attorneys will talk about the process/liquor license. We're food operators; 18 restaurants. The 19th restaurant is this one. Most are Mad Mex concepts. Looking forward to being here. We're used to going in neighborhoods like this. We've been pioneers for neighborhoods in the past. Shadyside – Casbah we were loners and now the whole area is beautiful. We are very neighborly; donations, constantly responding to email and phone calls, we definitely want to make an effort to be part of the neighborhood and get along with everyone.

Bill Fuller, President and Chef of Big Burrito: Alta Via Pizzeria

We wanted to do Italian, but healthier and fresh and more modern. The one thing we realized is that like in our own eating habits, people want to be healthier, have vegetables and salads, if they have pasta, they don't want hubcap size. We put this concept together to focus on those areas. Fresh pasta in house. Veggies. Salad. Wood fired grill oven. Throughout the whole process, they said are you going to do pizza? It just didn't fit with pasta and veggies at Alta Via. Once we got settled we looked into some different concepts in NY and SF and a lot of them have a sister restaurant that's pizza. So we're taking the best parts of alta via, vegetables that are seasonal and local and mixing it with really good pizza. We've been working on the dough for about a year and a half. A fresh fun environment. More casual. Some sandwiches and entrees. Different kinds of pizza. 14 inch rounds. Square Detroit also. The concept feels a lot more urbane than it does. This feels like it wants to be in a happening place. This is a menu that's been floating around. A lot of the items are Alta Via items. Some anti pasta apps, 4 salads, chopped veggies. Round and square pizzas. Roasted mushrooms and grilled, smoked mozz, a little sage. Double patty burger. This is still in flux but this is what it looks like for the most part.

Dan Rothchild, Architect: Our office is over on 29th St., so we're just down the street. I'm going to talk about the physical part of this. Where it's located. What the building looks like. We're two doors down from Morcilla. We're right across from that little parklet area. This building has been under construction for a while. We are a tenant, not developer. The building was designed by Jill Joyce. Designed for first floor restaurant. The developer wanted a restaurant in the space from the get go. There's a recess for dumpster so it's not in alley, etc. A lot of accommodations within the first floor for restaurant. Outdoor patio on the side, but enclosed. Main dining in front; bicycle parking up front. Kitchen in the back and bar really tucked on the side. Downstairs: alley backs into Perlora warehouse, so no residences in the back. There's an alcove for the dumpster. Parking is located underneath the building. Landlord has allowed us to have two spaces of those. The rest of the spaces will be the office tenants above. Accessibility down there and an elevator upstairs too. Now I'll hand it over to John to talk about the legal process.

John Kamin, Attorney: What's nice about this spot is that it's in an existing building. Complimentary use for first floor. We have to go to zoning for the restaurant use as a special exception. It's permitted in district as long as you meet certain criteria. Criteria are very minimalistic depending on size. The one issue is parking. We would be required to have 7 spots; we're entitled to a reduction by having bike spaces, so the code actually requires 5 spaces for us; we have 2 indoor. What we're asking for is 3 less parking spaces than would otherwise be required. Not a really big footprint; not a really big user. One of the things we did agree after initially meeting with LU and LC is to hire from the neighborhood; we will have separate internal bike spaces for employees. Help to ease a little bit of the congestion. We know parking is tight but we're in an existing building and a complimentary use. Happy to answer any questions about the zoning procedure. The rest of the team is, too.

Q & A:

Bernadette Elisco: Above the restaurant will just be office? No residents? Would they be willing to work with you to use spaces in the evening when they're not occupied?

BB: Yes, the landlord there is Lee Gross and he said he can't put it in writing within our lease but if the office tenants are amendable, we can definitely work something out to use those when they're not in use by tenants on the evening and weekend. The office tenant does have the right, and could refuse if they really wanted to, but we can try to work with that.

Elisco: Parking is a huge issue here. I live on 38th and literally last week somebody was parallel parked right in front of the entrance to my driveway. It's just going to keep getting worse.

BB: I've been blocked several times, so I get it.

Jeremy: Will the restaurant be kid friendly?

BB: Big Burrito restaurants are almost always kid friendly. We feel like this is going to end up in an environment, somewhere family accessible and with high chairs, we're super accepting of kids. So many people with families work for us.

Jeremy: Why not another Mad Mex location here?

BB: We have a bunch of them. There could be a couple more, but Lawrenceville is also close to waterworks/shadyside/Oakland. I think there's another place that's not here. This will be casual like that. Our goal was to have a fun casual place to eat that's affordable.

Bret Miller: Open for lunch?

BB: Yes, and also takeout and delivery options as well.

Q: Capacity?

BB: Approximately 100 people. All governed by code, we are still finishing the plans. I do want to stress that we are indeed a restaurant first, just with a bar.

Q: In reference to liquor license, is the city handing them out to anyone? What is that process like?

LU, Dave B: The city doesn't control it, it's controlled by the state. We've tried to think about what kind of local policies we could have to cap the number available or manage the process in some way. We do hear a lot of concern about the expansion of them, of course.

Lauren, LC: There's an extra public process that city council can weigh in on, but it is a state thing.

BB: There is a finite number of licenses in the state, but it does require an extra process to take them into the state in the first place. When I started in this business in 1993, liquor licenses used to be 18k, now they're 85k and counting. There are liquor licenses in the state worth several hundred thousand dollars.

LU: We just don't have the legal tools to control it here.

Q: The parking variance, does that have anything to do with on the street?

LU: The zoning code requires off-street parking.

John Kamin: The code applies to whole city. Same requirements in every neighborhood, no matter how dense it could be. We're only going for 3 less spaces than required, not a big number. These types of variances are meant to control more large scale development. And I'm

hoping we'll have access to 7 more places at night. Just because of the office tenant. Our staff will take advantage of those.

Frankie's Owners: We own Frankie's and it's been here since 1949, I've gone into my place in the daytime and my lot is full. We have 12 spaces out there and people definitely park in there all the time. We don't enforce it as much as we should, but we might start towing more forcefully.

BB: We have the same issue in Shadyside with our lots. I understand very much that concern. A lot of people tow. With the lots we have that are valet operated, the car count has gone down over the years because of uber and ride share. That's the good thing. People don't want to drink and drive. I do understand that for sure. Towing is always been the thing that's kept people in check.

BB: Our staff has a lot of enthusiasm for urban location. The chef lives just up the hill. He is super excited to be able to walk to work. Staff are excited to be able to commute in other ways. A lot of our people don't drive. Most of our employees use transit or ride share. I wouldn't drive my car to work and park down here.

Frankie's: We have about 12 spaces in our lot.

BB: Do you wanna lease some to us in the evening?

Frankie's: We can definitely talk about that!

End of presentation.

Closed Door Portion:

Dave, LU: Definitely heard some concerns about parking.

Q: Does LU or LC ever consider getting an old property to put in more of those little lots? Add some parking?

Lauren, LC: We've been talking to our elected officials. It's something we've talked about with the mayor and city council. Right now, we're trying to find more shared opportunities. Working on that. Talking to parking authority around the potential to acquire lots or partner with private lot owners. Like would the parking authority partner with lady of our angels parish to build a second deck on top of their existing parking? Frankly, there's not a lot of political will. Parking is expensive to build and especially compared to other uses.

To Big Burrito's point, a lot of movement is away from parking and toward other multi modal solutions. We can advocate for it for sure.

Comment: Where are we (residents) going to find places to park? I have friends coming to visit the neighborhood to come and see and they can never find a spot.

Comment: They can blame the city for that. They couldn't wait to send those guys to put those poles in. I'm sure they think parking meters are going to help, but is there reason for the parking meters?

Dave, LU: The idea of meters is to encourage churn so you don't have somebody sitting there all day. The spots are so valuable. You want people to be moving. But then it sort of pushes businesses and residents against each other because the employees of the businesses park in the back streets instead.

Lauren, LC: Business owners have talked about them getting permits or whatever for temporary use for their employees. There isn't a solution right now but employees/owners is an issue.

Q: Could we do something more about the impact of nightlife upon the neighborhood in general? It's becoming like South Side sometimes.

Dave, LU: There is something called a PED district in south side. RPP areas change some of the hours of enforcement to better reflect the times when people are coming to use nightlife. New meters and dynamic pricing- those funds can be used to increased police presence at night. Nuisance bar presence. That money was also funding the shuttle that was going on, etc. We've been asking for that for a while now. All signs point to this being the year we'll get some momentum on that. Maybe some of that money could go to shared parking solutions, bump-outs, bus shelters, anything that helps making things more pedestrian friendly. Things that would have public benefit and make Lawrenceville easier to navigate. It's also an issue we could look at with zoning code, like having a differentiation in that code between massive bars, breweries, actual restaurants, etc.

Elizabeth: So it sounds like they've got 100 person capacity, encourage takeout or delivery. How does the parking calculation work for that?

Dave, LU: So the zoning request they're seeking is restaurant general (over 2400 square ft). It's calculated like a spot for every 125 additional square footage or so. My math could be wrong, have to look it up exactly, but if they were under 2400 square feet zoning code doesn't require any parking at all. This is definitely a smaller footprint, and only a 3 space deviation from the requirement under code.

Lauren: I know there was a conversation with the owners of Wylie of their lot nearby becoming more public, eventually he wants to sell it to be developed, but we could try again though. Doesn't hurt to connect him so they could potentially lease out spots there, too.

Dave, LU: Ok, the hearing for this project is Feb 13 at 9 a.m. – open to the public at 200 Ross Street. If you want to speak to the zoning board, you can. They need these variances to open.