

Council gives last license to Dearborn eatery

By JON GRANT
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Faced with a Solomon-like decision, Farmington Hills officials voted Monday night to grant the city's last remaining liquor license to a Dearborn-based restaurant owner who plans to move into Halsted Village.

Antonio's Cucina Italiana was one of two applicants for a Class C license, which allows consumption of alcoholic beverages on the premises. The other, House of

India on Orchard Lake Road, has been in business for six years.

Antonio Rugiero, who will own the 5,600-square-foot Italian restaurant with his wife, Enrica, told officials they've been in business 36 years in Dearborn and Dearborn Heights.

"We chose Farmington Hills because we have a lot of customers who asked, 'When are you coming to Farmington Hills?'" he said. "Finally, we decide to come, and we find doors closed so far."

Rugiero referred to a recommendation from Police Chief Bill Dwyer that Antonio's be denied, based on the department's investigation. Assistant Chief Chuck Nebus said issues of concern included three liquor licenses already issued for businesses in the shopping plaza, questions over who would be managing the restaurant and the number of police contacts among the couple's children.

"The liquor code says the city may look at the license, as well as the people who may be... managing the restaurant," Nebus said, noting the chief had been told one of the couple's sons would be running the Hills establishment.

However, the couple assured officials they would be "hands-on" operators. Enrica Rugiero said they wanted to ensure the restaurant got off to a good start, as they had with their Dearborn Heights location. That shop, she added, would be operated by their children.

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Jon Grant
—Hills councilman

described as a "hands-on" operator by his representative John Karlen. Sharma owns no other restaurants, and has had no violations or problems in his six years of operation, Karlen said.

He also presented a petition signed by customers who felt a liquor license would complement the menu. House of India would not open a separate bar, but would offer only table service.

Karlen also made the point that as a small operator, Sharma would not have the resources to purchase any of the half-dozen overcrowded Hills liquor licenses held by other business owners.

Customers from both businesses appeared on behalf of the applicants, and the Rugieros presented a long list of community causes, civic organizations and charitable institutions to which

they have contributed or shown support. In the end, more council members were won over by their longevity and involvement.

Support

Councilman Jerry Ellis supported issuing the license to House of India, in part, because he felt the Rugieros' success in business gave them the resources to purchase a license, if they so desired. He noted they already held licenses in both restaurants.

"I think they deserve the same opportunity you have had granted to you in Dearborn and Dearborn Heights," Ellis told the couple.

"I think if we're going to give away our baby — our last license — we should give it to someone who's been here six years,"

Councilman Barry Brickner said. Ellis' motion favoring the House of India failed, with only Brickner, Chris McRae and Ellis supporting it.

The fact the Rugieros had held licenses for so long convinced councilwoman Vicki Barnett they would be the better candidate.

"I think a 30-year history without any violations shows a good track record of training employees," she said.

Councilman Jon Grant agreed. "I think the Rugieros have demonstrated a long history of being experienced and responsible restaurateurs. I'm very impressed by their community service."

Because the approval required at least five votes, Brickner said he'd change his, since the previous vote had failed. McRae and Ellis maintained their opposition.

Escrow

Officials all expressed the wish that they had more than one license to grant, and that may happen in the spring of 2001.

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The Farmington Observer

A HomeTown Communications Network™ publication
33411 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335
(On the southwest corner of Grand River and Farmington Rds.)

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