

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL BOARD

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FACT FINDING HEARING

IN THE MATTER OF:

The Berlin Group, LLC  
t/a Lapis  
1032-1034 Wisconsin Ave NW  
License No. 85260  
Retailer CR  
ANC 2E  
License in Extended  
DCMR 23-405 Status

THURSDAY, MAY 15, 2014

The Alcoholic Beverage Control Board met in the Alcoholic Beverage Control Hearing Room, Reeves Building, 2000 14th Street, N.W., Suite 400S, Washington, D.C. 20009, Ruthanne Miller, Chairperson, presiding.

PRESENT:

RUTHANNE MILLER, CHAIRPERSON  
NICK ALBERTI, MEMBER  
DONALD BROOKS, MEMBER  
HERMAN JONES, MEMBER  
MIKE SILVERSTEIN, MEMBER  
HECTOR RODRIGUEZ, MEMBER  
JAMES SHORT, MEMBER

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P R O C E E D I N G S

11:16 a.m.

CHAIRPERSON MILLER: So I believe this is the Berlin Group t/a Lapis, is that correct?

MR. O'BRIEN: That is correct.

CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Located at 1032 Wisconsin Avenue NW. License No. 85260.

Why don't you introduce yourself for the record?

MR. O'BRIEN: Stephen O'Brien for the licensee. My immediate left is Zubair Popal, Z-U-B-A-I-R, P-O-P-A-L. And to my far left is Omar Popal. The Popals are the managing members of the licensee.

CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay. Do you want to tell us -- give us an overview?

MR. O'BRIEN: Yes, I'll give you a quick overview. This license was one of the seven created when the moratorium, Georgetown moratorium was last amended. The Popal family

1 has operated Cafe Bonaparte further up  
2 Wisconsin Avenue in the 1500 block for quite  
3 a few years and have become very active in  
4 Georgetown. They applied for two licenses and  
5 were granted two licenses from the seven that  
6 were authorized when the moratorium was  
7 revised.

8 At the time, they had a contract  
9 to purchase the real estate at 1032 Wisconsin.  
10 That contract fell through and to date they  
11 have not identified a new location. I mention  
12 two because the other license they obtained at  
13 that time was for 3401 K Street, NW, under the  
14 freeway. And the Popal family pursued that  
15 aggressively and opened Malmaison about a year  
16 ago, which like every construction project in  
17 the history of the world, ran over budget and  
18 they went ahead and they got Malmaison opened  
19 up and running now. And now they are turning  
20 their attention to attempting to find a  
21 location for the Lapis license.

22 I bring up the other restaurant

1 that they've obtained a license for and opened  
2 to demonstrate that they are not speculators  
3 in licenses. They open restaurants. So  
4 that's roughly the posture of the matter as I  
5 understand it now. Of course, they've kept  
6 the fees up and they're available to answer  
7 any questions you have. That's where we are  
8 today and how we got there.

9 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Did they look  
10 at the property of the previous case that was  
11 here that was selling its place, oh, they have  
12 a liquor license, never mind.

13 Okay, so it's been since 2010,  
14 you've been looking for a place for the second  
15 license. That's four years, it's been four  
16 years?

17 MR. O. POPAL: We were busy  
18 building out the Malmaison. So this license  
19 was the first one that we had gotten. We  
20 purchased the building and it seemed that the  
21 building was not fit for what we needed to do.  
22 It's in an alley way that wasn't very

1 accessible. That was a commercial building.  
2 The two abutting neighbors were residential,  
3 so we had all those issues.

4 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Did you get  
5 two  
6 licenses at once?

7 MR. O. POPAL: No.

8 MR. O'BRIEN: Well, they were two  
9 of the seven that were created.

10 MR. O. POPAL: Of this  
11 application.

12 MR. O'BRIEN: I want to be  
13 explicit here though. They were two of the  
14 seven that were created, but what happened is  
15 they applied for this license that we're  
16 talking about and were granted that as one of  
17 the seven. The other six were spoken for, but  
18 then the Board canceled one of those other six  
19 because I think the Board sensed that it was  
20 a speculative acquisition. It didn't have a  
21 location. And so a slot opened up a period of  
22 months later and application was made for what

1 is now Malmaison license. So two of the seven  
2 that were created, but they weren't granted to  
3 these gentlemen at the exact same time. I  
4 don't know if that's confusing or helpful.

5 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: That's  
6 helpful. So how long have you been looking  
7 for a place for this license?

8 MR. O. POPAL: For six months now.

9 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: For six  
10 months.

11 MR. Z. POPAL: The project, we're  
12 looking for Lapis. It's a very unique  
13 restaurant which is not one of those  
14 restaurants that you go in a coma and just  
15 open it. So we have been in Georgetown since  
16 2003. We are a very active member of the  
17 community there. Now we have two restaurants  
18 there. We are working on the third one. And  
19 this concept, it's a very unique concept and  
20 has to be when in place with a full line that  
21 we have in mind. So that's what we're looking  
22 for actually.

1                   CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Do you have a  
2 best guess as to how long it will take you to  
3 find this place?

4                   MR. Z. POPAL: Our agents and  
5 people are working on it. So far we have not  
6 been able -- it's very hard to say when,  
7 honestly, but our intentions are to do this  
8 because that's one of my personal visions that  
9 I have to do this before I retire and get out  
10 of life.

11                   CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Do you have a  
12 time period in your mind, well, okay, within  
13 a year I will definitely have this? Or no,  
14 just however long it takes?

15                   MR. Z. POPAL: We just finished  
16 the project of Malmaison which is only 11  
17 months old. And the project was a little bit  
18 extended financially more because some  
19 unexpected expenses came there. But that's  
20 not the point. The point is we just finished  
21 one and now we are focusing on a second one.

22                   CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay.

1                   MR. Z. POPAL: We have it in  
2 Georgetown.

3                   CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay.  
4 Others? Mr. Brooks.

5                   MR. BROOKS: Yeah, and maybe  
6 you've already answered the question, are you  
7 limiting or restricting your search just for  
8 Georgetown?

9                   MR. Z. POPAL: Well, I think this  
10 particular idea that we have is ideal for  
11 Georgetown and we will pursue that and use  
12 Georgetown.

13                   We do have another property in  
14 other parts like in Adams Morgan, we have  
15 Napolitan Restaurant there, also which is  
16 ours.

17                   MR. BROOKS: Thank you, Madam  
18 Chair.

19                   CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay, others?

20                   MR. ALBERTI: Yes, I want to sort  
21 of go back and get the history a little  
22 clearer in my mind. So when the seven

1 licenses opened up, you acquired one of them  
2 with the intention of using this at 1031  
3 Wisconsin Avenue, is that correct?

4 MR. O'BRIEN: No, yes, yes.  
5 That's what we're here on today.

6 MR. ALBERTI: Right. What  
7 happened to that property that you didn't open  
8 up there? What happened there that you didn't  
9 open up?

10 MR. O. POPAL: It was a building  
11 we were looking at purchasing.

12 MR. ALBERTI: Oh, you were looking  
13 at purchasing the building at 1032, okay.

14 MR. O. POPAL: And so given all  
15 the contingencies in this coming through and  
16 that process took about eight months, I would  
17 say.

18 MR. ALBERTI: And it didn't come  
19 to fruition?

20 MR. O. POPAL: It did not, no.

21 MR. ALBERTI: So it took eight  
22 months. When did you acquire the license?

1                   MR. O'BRIEN: It would be, and I  
2 apologize again for not having the file here,  
3 I believe it's 2010. I believe that's when  
4 the Georgetown moratorium was revised. And  
5 these seven new slots were created.

6                   MR. ALBERTI: I understand -- and  
7 it was eight months later, when was that?  
8 What was the date that you decided that you  
9 weren't going to be able to purchase 1032  
10 Wisconsin Avenue?

11                  MR. O. POPAL: I'm sorry, it  
12 wasn't just eight months of just one thing.  
13 The application that we had and the filing for  
14 the ABC and going back and forth with  
15 neighbors took about eight months. And  
16 negotiation with the landlord took an  
17 additional eight months. So each of the  
18 different spectrums took time.

19                  MR. ALBERTI: So when did you  
20 realize you weren't going to be able to go  
21 into 1032 Wisconsin Avenue, that's what I'm  
22 asking.

1                   MR. O. POPAL: I think we could  
2 have been operating probably some time before  
3 2011.

4                   MR. ALBERTI: When did you  
5 purchase the license for Malmaison?

6                   MR. O. POPAL: That license wasn't  
7 purchased.

8                   MR. ALBERTI: You're right,  
9 absolutely. I misspoke because that license  
10 became available. When did you acquire that  
11 license?

12                   MR. O'BRIEN: I believe it would  
13 have been within -- I'm guessing, six month-  
14 ish of the initial availability of the  
15 license.

16                   MR. ALBERTI: And when was that?

17                   MR. O'BRIEN: That would be some  
18 time probably in 2010.

19                   MR. ALBERTI: I can check my  
20 records on all of this. So if these dates are  
21 correct while you were still eyeing 1032  
22 Wisconsin Avenue, you acquired the second

1 license?

2 MR. O'BRIEN: Yes.

3 MR. O. POPAL: We started both  
4 projects at the same. We had one going on and  
5 then --

6 MR. ALBERTI: -- were on the  
7 second project, okay. Well, I'm trying to  
8 understand.

9 MR. O. POPAL: The first project  
10 we started kind of fell through, but that  
11 second project kept going and so --

12 MR. ALBERTI: -- I'm trying to  
13 understand that. All right. How long did it  
14 take you -- so when you acquired the license  
15 some time in 2010 or early 2011 for Malmaison,  
16 did you have a lease?

17 MR. O. POPAL: We did.

18 MR. ALBERTI: Did you -- had you  
19 identified a location at that time?

20 MR. O. POPAL: Yes.

21 MR. O'BRIEN: And the application  
22 was submitted with a letter of intent.

1 MR. ALBERTI: For 3401.

2 MR. O'BRIEN: For 3401 which  
3 eventually went into a full-fledged lease.

4 MR. ALBERTI: I'm not going to  
5 bore you with why I'm asking these questions,  
6 but I want to have a full picture here as I  
7 think through this. That's very helpful.  
8 Okay, thank you. That's been very helpful  
9 thank you.

10 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Other  
11 questions? Anything else you want to say, Mr.  
12 O'Brien?

13 MR. O'BRIEN: No ma'am.

14 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: No?

15 MR. O'BRIEN: I don't want to say  
16 anything else.

17 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Is this the  
18 wrong address to have with this license, 1032  
19 Wisconsin or is that still --

20 MR. O'BRIEN: It doesn't really  
21 have an address.

22 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Doesn't have

1 an address, okay.

2 MR. O'BRIEN: That's the problem.

3 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Yes. Okay.

4 Does the Board want to take any action on this  
5 case?

6 MR. ALBERTI: Yes, I think we  
7 ought to set a time schedule for when we would  
8 like to have them -- and benchmarks we'd like  
9 to see from these applicants because -- that's  
10 what I'd like.

11 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Is this the  
12 same situation as the previous case?

13 MR. ALBERTI: You want to speak to  
14 that, Mr. O'Brien? I'd like to hear your  
15 opinion.

16 MR. O'BRIEN: In candor, it's not.

17 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay.

18 MR. O'BRIEN: This is not a  
19 safekeeping license.

20 MR. ALBERTI: It's a 405.

21 MR. O'BRIEN: 405.

22 MR. ALBERTI: The license has

1 never been issued.

2 MR. O'BRIEN: And the regulation  
3 that I cited in the previous case --

4 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: For  
5 safekeeping.

6 MR. ALBERTI: I want to make sure  
7 there wasn't some wrinkle I was missing, so I  
8 was deferring to Mr. O'Brien. I also wanted  
9 to see what Mr. O'Brien had to say. I knew  
10 you would refer to that. I didn't know if it  
11 was something I was missing. And you're much  
12 more knowledgeable than I am.

13 MR. O'BRIEN: You're far too kind.

14 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay, so this  
15 license has been in safekeeping since 2010 and  
16 what I've heard is the licensee at this point  
17 is actively looking to use it in a new  
18 location that you intend to purchase, is that  
19 right? Okay.

20 Are there thoughts as to what we'd  
21 like to take on this applicant?

22 MR. ALBERTI: They're personally -

1 - I'm impressed with the fact that they've --  
2 they have a successful restaurant in Adams  
3 Morgan. I think we have some standard policy  
4 of what we do here, but I have to take every  
5 case as it comes. But I would like to see  
6 them acquire a place, have positive evidence  
7 that they've acquired a place within a year.  
8 Usually we give six months, but I think in  
9 this case, given their history of success,  
10 I'll give them a little bit more time because  
11 I'm a little bit more -- I personally am a  
12 little more confident that they really are  
13 more sincere in working and opening their own  
14 project here.

15 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay. Are  
16 you looking to review anything prior to that  
17 year?

18 MR. ALBERTI: I'd like to have  
19 them back in six months and then -- with that  
20 benchmark of a year, okay, have you identified  
21 a place? Do you have at least a letter of  
22 intent? Where are we at in a year? I want

1 to hear something positive in a year because  
2 I just can't let these things hang out there  
3 forever. We've already discussed that.

4 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay, so the  
5 statute speaks in terms of review within six-  
6 month increments so is there something that  
7 you  
8 -- obviously, we can have a fact finding  
9 hearing and you can give us an update within  
10 six months.

11 MR. ALBERTI: Right, and I don't  
12 have a bench mark for that six-month period.  
13 I want to hear something positive, but I  
14 don't have a benchmark. But I do have a  
15 benchmark for a year which is a lease or some  
16 assurance that they have a place identified  
17 that's viable.

18 CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Okay.

19 MR. ALBERTI: Not just pie in the  
20 sky, but I want some tangible piece of  
21 evidence that it's a viable location that has  
22 every likelihood of being occupied by them.

1                   CHAIRPERSON MILLER: How about you  
2 submit something in writing in a little less  
3 than six months, giving us an update and we  
4 can schedule a fact finding, but see whether  
5 a fact finding is necessary based on what you  
6 submit.

7                   MR. O'BRIEN: Very well.

8                   CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Is that all  
9 right? And then with the one year, that goal  
10 or benchmark of having a place. Would that  
11 work? Okay. Do I need a motion on that? Is  
12 that the consensus of the Board? Is that  
13 clear? Okay.

14                  MR. O'BRIEN: Thank you very much.

15                  CHAIRPERSON MILLER: Thank you  
16 very much, good luck.

17                  (Whereupon, at 11:33 a.m., the  
18 fact finding hearing was concluded.)  
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<b>A</b>	<b>availability</b> 11:14 <b>available</b> 4:6 11:10 <b>Ave</b> 1:9 <b>Avenue</b> 2:8 3:2 9:3 10:10,21 11:22	14:11,17 15:4,14 16:15 17:4,18 18:1,8,15 <b>check</b> 11:19 <b>cited</b> 15:3 <b>clear</b> 18:13 <b>clearer</b> 8:22 <b>COLUMBIA</b> 1:1 <b>coma</b> 6:14 <b>come</b> 9:18 <b>comes</b> 16:5 <b>coming</b> 9:15 <b>commercial</b> 5:1 <b>community</b> 6:17 <b>concept</b> 6:19,19 <b>concluded</b> 18:18 <b>confident</b> 16:12 <b>confusing</b> 6:4 <b>consensus</b> 18:12 <b>construction</b> 3:16 <b>contingencies</b> 9:15 <b>contract</b> 3:8,10 <b>Control</b> 1:3,15,15 <b>correct</b> 2:5,6 9:3 11:21 <b>course</b> 4:5 <b>CR</b> 1:10 <b>created</b> 2:21 5:9,14 6:2 10:5	<b>early</b> 12:15 <b>eight</b> 9:16,21 10:7 10:12,15,17 <b>estate</b> 3:9 <b>eventually</b> 13:3 <b>evidence</b> 16:6 17:21 <b>exact</b> 6:3 <b>expenses</b> 7:19 <b>explicit</b> 5:13 <b>extended</b> 1:11 7:18 <b>eyeing</b> 11:21	<b>given</b> 9:14 16:9 <b>giving</b> 18:3 <b>go</b> 6:14 8:21 10:20 <b>goal</b> 18:9 <b>going</b> 10:9,14,20 12:4,11 13:4 <b>good</b> 18:16 <b>gotten</b> 4:19 <b>granted</b> 3:5 5:16 6:2 <b>Group</b> 1:8 2:4 <b>guess</b> 7:2 <b>guessing</b> 11:13
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