DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL BOARD
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MEETING

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IN THE MATTER OF:

Whitfield Entertainment:
Group Studios, Inc.:
t/a Whitfield Entertainment Group:
1301 W Street, N.E.:
Retailer CX - ANC 5C:
License #120468:

(New Class CX License Application):
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Wednesday
March 30, 2022

The Alcoholic Beverage Control Board met via WebEx videoconference, Chairperson Donovan W. Anderson presiding.

PRESENT:

DONOVAN W. ANDERSON, Chairperson
BOBBY CATO, JR., Member
RAFI ALIYA CROCKETT, Member
EDWARD S. GRANDIS, Member
JENI HANSEN, Member
JAMES SHORT, JR., Member
ALSO PRESENT:
SARAH FASHBAUGH, DC ABRA Staff
VONISHA HODGE, Applicant
MARIA MURPHY, Applicant
SHAWN TOWNSEND, Applicant's Counsel
P-R-O-C-E-E-D-I-N-G-S

10:41 a.m.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: The second case in our calendar is a fact-finding hearing. It's Whitfield Entertainment Group, License No. 120468.

Ms. Fashbaugh, good morning, can you please elevate the rights of the parties in this case, please?

MS. FASHBAUGH: Please stand by.

Maria Murphy, your rights have been elevated. Vonisha Hodge, your rights have been elevated. And Shawn Townsend, your rights have been elevated.

That is all, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Good morning, thank you. Good morning, everyone, I would like -- I would like the parties to please introduce themselves for the record. It's my understanding that Mr. Townsend has entered his appearance. So can you please spell and state your name for the record, starting with you, Mr. Townsend?

MR. TOWNSEND: Good morning, Chairman and members of the Board. My name is Shawn Townsend, S-H-A-W-N, T-O-W-N-S-E-N-D. And I'm
here on behalf of Whitfield Entertainment Group, and I believe Maria Murphy and Vonisha are on as well.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: I saw -- I'll have Ms. Murphy, can you please spell and state your name for the record and your relationship to this establishment, please.

MS. MURPHY: Hi, my name is Maria Murphy, M-A-R-I-A, M-U-R-P-H-Y, and I am the president of Whitfield Entertainment Group Studios.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Good morning, Ms. Hodge, can you please spell and state your name for the record and your relationship please.

MS. HODGE: Good morning, my name is Vonisha Hodge, V-O-N-I-S-H-A, H-O-D-G-E, and I am the CFO at Whitfield Entertainment Group.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Good morning. All right, good morning, everyone. This is a fact-finding hearing on the Whitfield Entertainment Group. And the sole purpose of this fact-finding hearing is to establish whether the Applicant qualifies as a multipurpose facility under 25-113(g)(1).

The Board's practice has always been
to allow legitimate multipurpose facility applicants to proceed forward to the public comment phase.

To establish itself as a multipurpose facility, the applicant needs to satisfy the Board that it is, one, either a legitimate theater, university, museum, conference center, or gallery or other facility for the performance of sports, cultural, or tourism-related activities.

Or two, an indoor park, building, or facility that primarily serves as a recreational playground or a work base.

And just to inform again the parties, this is a fact-finding hearing. The Board has not made any determination. The Board is gathering information. And so whatever information the Board gathers today, we will make a determination.

And the determination that the Board will make is to state whether or not this is a proper license class for this facility, or the Board might inform the licensee that they should apply for a different type of license class.

If the Board determines that this is
the proper license class for this facility, what
the Board -- the Board would then make it our
recommendation to the agency that the facility be
placarded. So that's basic -- those are
basically where the Board is today, we're just
gathering information.

Our fact-finding hearing parties are
not sworn. We're just gathering information.
The Board at a fact-finding hearing cannot
legally require an applicant to do any specific
action.

We can ask, if you so desire you can
say yes or no. But the Board cannot legally
require the applicant, or in this particular case
the applicant to take any specific action.

Now, does everyone understood where we
are today?

MS. HODGE: Yes.

MR. TOWNSEND: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: All right, so
who will be speaking -- who will be speaking?
Are you, Mr. Townsend, or you, Ms. Murphy?

MS. MURPHY: I believe it'll be a
little bit of both, but you can start with me,
sir.
CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: All right, fine. Good morning, Ms. Murphy, welcome. And you have applied for a CX license. So can you please tell us what's your business plan?

MS. MURPHY: Sure. So we are a startup entity. We've put together a business during -- for the last two years during the pandemic and we went, started operations effective August of last year. And our business plan is that we are going to be or that we are, excuse me, a -- also called a full-service entertainment company.

We offer film, music, special events. And in our building, we touch upon all the areas of which you mentioned, you know, for, applicable for a CX license. Not only do we have special events, but in addition to that, we have -- we are in negotiations or have been in negotiations for -- offer stage plays, concerts, corporate events.

We are building recording studios that will be on our second floor. And we will be second recording studio in the DC proper. There's only one other smaller studio in DC.

In addition to that, we're negotiating
with NBA 2K just to run their gaming league. So I believe that we cover multifaceted areas.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Now, I'm aware that the ABC Board had approved some temporary licenses for your establishment. And so just for the record, what it is that you had submitted temporary licenses that were approved by the ABC Board. So what were -- can you explain to us what were those events?

MS. MURPHY: Oh, sure.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: What events were those for?

MS. MURPHY: I don't know if everybody watches Netflix, but there's a show on Netflix called Bridgerton, and it's a Netflix and Shonda Rhimes production. And what they've done is turn the show called Bridgerton, and it's called the Queen's Ball, into an immersive, live art experience.

And that is currently at our studio. It'll be in the studio through the end of -- end of July. And then we'll segue into another experience which I'll mention momentarily.

But the licenses are particularly for Bridgerton, the Queen's Ball. It's a very
elegant experience. And where people wear --
Bridgerton takes places in the 1800s, and people
come in in gowns and 1800 type clothing, and with
the wigs that were worn at that time.

And so because it's the Queen's Ball,
they do need to be able to serve alcohol and that
type. So it's a whole take on an 1800s type live
experience. So it's dancing, there's acrobatics
like Cirque de Soleil type acrobatics, and things
like that.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: This is the
type of event that you plan to have at your
facility?

MS. MURPHY: Yes, well, we're
currently having it now. Yes, sir.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: No, I'm saying
what for -- is this a good -- I'm asking is this
an example of the type of event?

MS. MURPHY: Yes, yes, sir. So our
facility right now is -- we call it the black box
because you can create your experience or what
you need to have in the box. So this experience
will be through, for Bridgerton, through June.
And then -- excuse me, through July.

Then, after July, the black box is
going to be transformed into a -- it's called Mexican Genius. If you're familiar with Frida Kahlo and her art. And so it's sort of similar to a Van Gogh Experience, but it will be the Mexican Genius. That's what will -- the type of event that we're moving into right after Bridgerton for the next year.

And then in addition to that, you know, it may remain another experience, or we have offers in which we will be selling production in there. Because the sound stage, the black box, is fully soundproof and was initially built for BET for film and production.

So we can change the experience of the black box based upon the particular -- particular need. So it can be special events, as well as it can be used, you know, for us when we have filming and production.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Ms. Murphy, you have mentioned the block -- the black box, and what is a -- what's a black box?

MS. MURPHY: Well, at least our particular black box is a sound stage. And it's about 17,000 square feet, and it encompasses everything that's needed for film and production.
And the reason why it's called a black box is because it can be created into what you -- what you particularly need.

For the sound stage, it could be built -- if it -- it we're building it for a film in production, it could be -- have hospital sets and -- or bars, or you know, a house.

As well as it then can be transformed into something else, you know, that's needed. Backyard scenes, whatever is needed. It could be transformed into what we're currently having now. So it's generically in the industry, we refer to it as a black box because literally because of the sound stage, it's all black.

MR. TOWNSEND: And Mr. Chairman, if I could just add, too?

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Go ahead, Mr. Townsend.

MR. TOWNSEND: If I can just add briefly that, for context, this is the former BET campus where the BET campus was located. And so this is -- you know, BET, as many of you may know, historically have had a number of events there in the past.

So Maria and her fianc, who
unfortunately passed away from COVID in the winter, they have a vision of creating not only just the -- some of the experiences that took place at the former BET experience or sound stage.

But they are in talks -- they have been in talks with a number of networks about filming and producing shows there. They have had a number of events there, ranging from concerts to live performances to just anything involving film.

And I'd be remiss if I did not add that we've also been -- we are right next door to the office of Cable Film Television Entertainment, and we have been in close talks with them. And they have also been referring us to, you know, different companies and producers who have been interested in filming in DC.

So not only is it, you know, the entertainment, providing the entertainment piece. But we're also providing an opportunity for DC residents to learn new trades, be employed locally here in the city. And so I think it's a really good opportunity for us to revitalize that space that's been dilapidated for quite some
time.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Mr. Townsend,
I noticed you stated that there's been other
events there, but to the best of my knowledge and
recollection, we have only provided alcohol
license for the Bridgerton -- I'm sorry, for this
most current production. So were alcohols sold
at the other -- sold or served at the previous
events?

MR. TOWNSEND: So, good question. And
when we're talking about, you know, filming and
producing there, there has not been alcohol
served.

And on the occasions that alcohol was
served, Maria and the staff have contracted with
a caterer who has -- who is of course an ABRA-
certified caterer and able to serve the food and
the alcoholic beverages as an accessory to the
food.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you.
Now, will you have any type of nightclub
practicing at this venue? Is this as a bar, live
entertainment, bottle service, VIP sections,
dance floor?

MS. MURPHY: We have had events that
have been concerts and dancing events. But that
is not -- I wouldn't call us that we are a
nightlife venue. We, as having a black box and
having special events, we do have those types of
events, but it's not our day to day.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Now, are there
any other venues in the city that you would
consider yourselves -- your proposed venue is
similar to?

MS. MURPHY: I would say that we're
similar to Anthem, that's probably the most.
Because Anthem can be used for multipurpose type
of events as well. I would think that we're a
smaller type of a -- of a capital arena, you
know. Because there is obviously liquor,
basketball, and but they also have special events
as well and host concerts.

I would think that -- I did -- I would
think at some of the colleges and universities
where they have various events as well at their
facility.

And I was remiss with not mentioning
that we are in negotiations with Howard
University to help provide opportunities for
hands-on experience with their students in their
film program at the master's level. So.

MR. TOWNSEND: And I would just add that the venue is currently operating as, I mean, in comparison to Arena Stage or the Shakespeare Theater, where, you know, we have a live theatrical, you know, play for lack of better words, taking place right now.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you. I don't have any other questions. Any questions by any other Board member? Yes, Mr. Short, you want to ask a question.

MEMBER SHORT: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Good morning, Mr. Townsend, Ms. Murphy, and Ms. Hodge.

MR. TOWNSEND: Good morning.

MS. MURPHY: Good morning.

MEMBER SHORT: Okay, this question is to any or all of you, but I guess probably Mr. Townsend would like to answer this, but any one of you can. Just pretty much on the Board and for the record, can you describe this building? And describe the building and the community surrounding it, please, very briefly.

MR. TOWNSEND: Maria?

MS. MURPHY: Want me? Sure. Our
building is about 57,000 square feet. It's two floors. The sound stage in particular that we are referencing as the black box is about 17,000 square feet. We have currently in the building we've had -- well, some things are under renovation.

You know, we've had the concerts or special events. We've had Netflix and Master Class in there producing shows, as well as now, as you know, that we're having the Bridgerton experience on the first floor.

On the second floor right now it is empty, but we are currently in negotiations and working with an architect to build out recording studios. So we will have three recording studios and about four podcast studios on the second floor. And we'll be breaking ground on that very shortly.

The surrounding area, sir, is industrial. There's -- actually, we're right next door to the city dump, as well as next door we have a -- the car repair service. Across the way there's a vendor that they produce food, so we have food trucks coming in and out.

So it's all commercial around us. As
well as what Mr. Townsend mentioned, we are
neighbors to the Office of Cable and Television
and Film. As well as, I think, the Metro, the
Metro is there as well.

MEMBER SHORT: Okay, what are the
classification that DCRA or the Department of
Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, what
classification have they classified this building
as? What do -- or do you know that?

MS. MURPHY: John, do you?

MEMBER SHORT: The classification, the
building classification. Is it a --

MR. TOWNSEND: Mr. Short, it's zoned
as PDR-4.

MEMBER SHORT: Okay, thank you. What
is the total occupancy of the building?

MR. TOWNSEND: Nineteen-hundred, sir.

MEMBER SHORT: Okay, and you know I
was going to ask this question probably, Mr.
Townsend. The number of exits and egress from
the building?

MR. TOWNSEND: I will defer to Maria
on that. We probably should have had our
building engineer on.

MS. MURPHY: Sure, no, I can tell you.
I can count real fast. I know the building very well, I've given a lot of tours. One, two, three, four, five -- it's at least six.

MEMBER SHORT: Six exits and egress for how many people?

MS. MURPHY: Nineteen-hundred, sir.

MEMBER SHORT: Couple hundred -- how many?

MS. MURPHY: About 1900.

MEMBER SHORT: Nineteen-hundred.

Okay, also I guess what I'd like to ask is have you reached out to any of the community, the ANC or any of the other persons in the community, who might have interests? Or do they have opinions if you have reached out to them?

MR. TOWNSEND: Mr. Short, I have reached out to Chairperson Jackie Manning of ANC 5C over the past few months and have had conversations with her about our interests in applying for an alcohol license.

She personally has expressed her support, but obviously she cannot speak for the rest of the commission. And I plan to continue to have conversations with not only Chairperson Manning, but the entire ANC after today's
hearing.

MEMBER SHORT: Okay, that sounds great. You've done your homework, and I certainly as a Board member appreciate that. I know the Board, all the Board members do.

Again, so is there any build-out left to be done or is there anything extra that's going to be added or taken away from the building as it is now, should this board decide to grant CX license to you?

MS. MURPHY: The build-out that we were talking is to the facade. It won't necessarily interfere with or take away from what we are currently offering and what's in our business plan.

But there will be some structural designs. Eventually down the road we have a plan to, you know, make it look like, you know, more attractive and make it more of a monument, I'll say, of an area of a place of attraction for folks in the DMV.

MEMBER SHORT: Okay. So other than aesthetics, which you've just described, are there any other building or construction that needs to be done to make this a very wholesome
CX?

MS. MURPHY: We will, other than what I've mentioned, you know, for building out the recording studios, no. I mean, there is a full-service kitchen, a prep kitchen that needs to be put in. But it's just going to -- that's going to be prep. And so we'll have warming stations, there'll be no live cooking on the space. Other than that --

MEMBER SHORT: Okay, I appreciate that answer. And also I'm very happy to hear that the ANC, ANC 5 is committed to working with you with this.

Now, one last issue, and that would be parking. How many people will be parking or driving to your area, and how would that affect or effect the community?

MS. MURPHY: Sure. Well, we're very fortunate that we have about 484 parking spaces.

MEMBER SHORT: I'm very appreciative of that information, and thank you so very much, thank all three of you.

MR. TOWNSEND: Thank you.

MEMBER SHORT: That's all I have, Mr. Chair.
CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you, Mr. Short. Any other questions by any other Board members? I'll just ask the one -- I mean, there are many different type of license class that a license can be applied for. One you can apply for a nightclub, you can apply for a tavern, you can apply for a restaurant.

And so why is it that you believe that this is the appropriate license class, that the multipurpose license is -- why is it that you specifically want this particular type of license?

MR. TOWNSEND: Well, Mr. Chairman, I think, you know, Maria laid out several events that have happened in the past and some of the things that we are interested in hosting at the facility in the future. And the events directly correlate with the definition of a CX.

We have theatrical, we have cultural events for not only residents here in the city, but folks who are visiting from out of town to the city. We want this place to be another attraction in addition to things that you may -- you may visit DC for. This is a place where, excuse me, where we've had boxing matches and
fundraisers, etc.

So it's not just a place where we want, you know, patrons to attend to consume alcoholic beverages, but it's more than just a tavern or a restaurant. And I think that, you know, a multipurpose CX license is the only option that we were interested in at the time.

As we thought through all of the different types of events and amenities that we wanted to offer to patrons, this is the reason why we're here today. Because we think that, you know, a CX license is the right license for this facility.

Given you have other venues in the city with this type of license that one would argue, one meaning me, would argue that WEG is offering more, a more multicultural, diverse genre of events taking place at 1301 W Street, NE.

So Maria, if you'd like to add anything to that.

MS. MURPHY: Yeah, no I -- but Shawn, thank you. That I think says it properly. And you know, in addition, what we are doing, we want to be a place to -- to be -- to be a service to
the community. There's so many talented youth
and young adults in the area that don't have a
place to go to film or to lay a track, you know,
at the recording studio.

Already we've given away many hours to
young directors who can't afford a place to a go
to shoot. And they come over here and they --
and we offer that to them. We have already had
someone who is in training for me.

Unfortunately because we're a start-
up, we don't have, you know, money which to pay
people or young interns. And they were able to
get a position with Bridgerton full-time.

So we're offering training
opportunities to people where they can, young
folks where they will not then be hindered from
getting the job because they actually have
experience.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: All right, any
final comment you want to make before we bring --
or any final comments you want to make or any
additional questions any Board member wants to
make before --

MEMBER SHORT: Mr. Chair, one last
question.
CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Yes, Mr. Short, yes.

MEMBER SHORT: I would just like to ask the panelists or coming before us today, could or would they be willing to submit a floor plan to the Board to help us better make our decision?

MS. MURPHY: Of course.

MR. TOWNSEND: Yes, we can provide that.

MEMBER SHORT: Okay, because we can't -- we can't really ask you to do anything today, other than -- or make a request of you today. But if you would do that, I think it would help some of us Board members come to a better decision. Thank you.

That's all I have, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: I thank you, Mr. Short. Any final comments you want to make before -- Mr. Townsend or Ms. Murphy, I know you haven't spoken, Ms. Hodge. But anyone, any of the three -- any comments that you want to make before bringing this hearing to a close?

MR. TOWNSEND: That's it for me.

MS. MURPHY: No, I just want to thank
you for your consideration.

             MS. HODGE: Yeah, just thank you.
             CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Well, thank you very much for your presentation this morning.
             As I stated, the recommendation, what the Board will now decide, is whether or not if the Board determines that this is the proper license class to apply for, we will turn it back over to the agency for the agency to follow the process. And the process would be that the matter is placarded to inform the community.
             If the Board believes that this is not the proper type of license to apply for, then the Board will -- the Board with the agency will make recommendations to you to see what other type of license would be -- would more -- would be more appropriate for your business plan.
             All right, so we'll take this matter under advisement and we will inform you shortly of our decision.
             Thank you very much.
             MR. TOWNSEND: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, thank you, members of the Board.
             MS. MURPHY: Thank you.
             MS. HODGE: Thank you.
CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you, bye-bye.

(Whereupon, the above-entitled matter went off the record at 11:11 a.m.)
Neal R. Gross and Co., Inc.
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| spaces | 19:19 |
| speak | 17:22 |
| speaking | 5:21,21 |
| special | 6:13,16 9:16 13:4,16 15:8 |
| specific | 5:10,15 specifically 20:11 |
| spell | 2:21 3:5,13 |
| spoken | 23:21 |
| sports | 4:9 |
| square | 9:24 15:1,4 staff 1:22 12:15 |
| stand | 2:10 |
| start | 5:24 |
| start- | 22:10 |
| started | 6:8 |
| starting | 2:22 |
| startup | 6:6 |
| state | 2:21 3:5,13 4:21 |
| stated | 12:3 24:5 |
| stations | 19:7 |
| Street | 1:8 21:18 |
| structural | 18:16 |
| students | 13:25 |
| studio | 6:23,24 7:20,21 22:4 |
| studios | 1:6 3:11 6:21 15:15,15,16 19:4 |
| submit | 23:5 |
| submitted | 7:6 |
| support | 17:22 |
| surrounding | 14:23 15:19 |
| sworn | 5:8 |
| thought | 21:8 |
| three | 15:15 17:3 19:22 23:22 |
| today | 4:18 5:5,17 21:11 23:4,12,13 |
| today's | 17:25 |
| total | 16:16 |
| touch | 6:14 |
| tourism-related | 4:9 |
| tours | 17:2 |
| town | 20:21 |
| track | 22:3 |
| trades | 11:22 |
| training | 22:9,14 |
| transformed | 9:1 10:8 10:11 |
| trucks | 15:24 |
| turn | 7:16 24:8 |
| types | 13:4 21:9 |
| understanding | 2:19 |
| understood | 5:16 |
| unfortunately | 11:1 22:10 |
| universities | 13:19 |
| university | 4:7 13:24 |
| V |
| V-O-N-I-S-H-A | 3:16 |
| Van | 9:4 |
| various | 13:20 |
| vendor | 15:23 |
| venue | 12:22 13:3,8 14:3 |
| venues | 13:7 21:14 |
| conference | 1:14 |
| videoconference | 1:14 |
| VIP | 12:23 |
| vision | 11:2 |
| visit | 20:24 |
| visiting | 20:21 |
| Vonisha | 1:22 2:12 3:2 3:16 |
| W |
| W | 1:8,15,17 21:18 |
| wanted | 21:10 |
| wants | 22:22 |
| warming | 19:7 |
| watches | 7:14 |
| way | 15:23 |
| wear | 8:1 |
| WebEx | 1:14 |
| Wednesday | 1:12 |
| WEG | 21:16 |
| welcome | 6:2 |
| went | 6:8 25:4 |
| Whitfield | 1:6,7 2:5 3:1 3:10,17,20 |
| wholesome | 18:25 |
| wigs | 8:4 |
| willing | 23:5 |
| winter | 11:2 |
| words | 14:7 |
| work | 4:13 |
| working | 15:14 19:12 |
| worn | 8:4 |
| wouldn't | 13:2 |
| X |
| Y |
| year | 6:9 9:7 |
| years | 6:7 |
| young | 22:2,6,12,15 youth | 22:1 |
| Z |
| zoned | 16:13 |
| 0 |
| 1 |
| 10:41 | 2:2 |
| 11:11 | 25:4 |
| 120468 | 1:9 2:6 |
| 1301 | 1:8 21:18 |
| 17,000 | 9:24 15:3 |
| 1800 | 8:3 |
| 1800s | 8:2,7 |
| 1900 | 17:9 |
| 2 |
| 2022 | 1:12 |
| 25-113(g)(1) | 3:24 |
| 2K | 7:1 |
| 3 |
| 30 | 1:12 |
| 4 |
| 484 | 19:19 |
| 5 |

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In the matter of: Whitfield Entertainment Group

Before: DC ABRA

Date: 03-30-22

Place: teleconference

was duly recorded and accurately transcribed under my direction; further, that said transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings.

__________________
Court Reporter

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