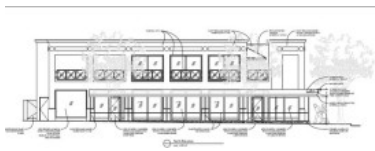




After Long Fight, Brewery and Restaurant Moving into Rail District

Despite concerns from residents in the surrounding neighborhood, the Griffin Claw Brewing Co. received final approval from the City Commission on Monday.

By [Laura Houser](#) | [Email the author](#) | December 14, 2011



It took nearly three hours to make the decision, but a combination brewery, restaurant and beer garden will soon be moving into Birmingham's Rail District.

After a public comment session in which dozens of residents and area business owners chimed in, commissioners unanimously agreed to approve the final site plan and special land-use permit for the Griffin Claw Brewing Co. at their Monday night meeting. The restaurant is looking to move into 563 and 575 S. Eton St., which is currently empty.

However, the brewery ran up against formidable opposition during the months in which the issue traveled through the city's approval process. Residents were concerned with the potential for noise and traffic problems, as well as with the relatively close proximity of such a large establishment — nearly 12,000 square feet — to residential areas.

The plan

Who

The restaurant and brewery would be owned and operated by Norman LaPage and his wife, Bonnie, current owners of the [Big Rock Chop House](#) and [The Reserve](#). Big Rock, which opened in 1997, is also home to the [Got Rocks Diamond Crown Cigar Bar](#), which opened in 2006.

LaPage is also a partner in the District Lofts condominium complex immediately behind his two restaurants, both of which are situated on Eton Street in the Rail District.

In addition, Dan Rogers, current brewmaster at Big Rock, would move over to become the brewmaster at the Griffin Claw.

Where

The building would be situated on two lots at 563 and 575 S. Eton Street, next to the [Whistle Stop Restaurant](#). The lot currently has a small office

The Griffin Claw Brewing Co. will comprise two separate components: a brewery and adjoining tasting room, and a restaurant with an outdoor beer garden. The total footprint of the project will take up 11,970 square feet and will include a 96-space parking lot behind the facility.

Other details:

- LePage described the restaurant as casual. "When I say casual ... we're putting in bike racks so that people can ride their bikes down from the neighborhoods and can come in and perhaps have a bratwurst or a hamburger and a glass of beer."
- The beer garden will be situated just off Eton Street but will be separated behind a wall. Tables in the beer garden and restaurant will be long and communal, reminiscent of traditional German restaurants.
- The brewery will be visible through large, plate-glass windows facing Eton Street. A tasting room and walk-in cooler will be situated off the brewery, on the south side of the building, with their own entrances.
- While the restaurant will close at 2 a.m. most nights, the beer garden will close at 11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and at midnight Fridays and Saturdays.
- As a brewery, all alcohol sold on premises must be brewed on site. LaPage said the restaurant will specialize in beer but will also have select wines, as well as vodka and gin that it distills itself.

The backlash

According to Planning Director Jana Ecker, the city received four letters in opposition to the plan before Monday night's meeting, as well as a petition against it signed by 39 residents.

Residents' main concerns included the potential for noise problems, light spilling over into adjoining neighborhoods and the anticipated traffic congestion. Many residents said Eton is already a busy street, and they expect restaurant customers will park in the adjoining neighborhoods instead of in the parking lot.

"There will be problems from this project," said resident and attorney William Roy, whose law offices are located on Eton Street. "People aren't going to park in the lot. People are going to be parking on those streets."

Other residents were concerned with the potential for noise. Resident Barbara MacIntosh said the noise from The Reserve is already "deafening." Along those same lines, Roy pointed out that a business such as a brewery and restaurant belongs downtown, not near homes.

"Why would you subject these residents to the noise, lights and odors of a brewery?" he said. "The residents can't leave if it gets too loud — they are already home."

Many of the concerns centered around Eton Street, which many residents said was already too busy and sometimes dangerous.

Bowers Street resident Laura Edwards asked the commission whether perhaps pedestrian improvements for the corridor could be worked into the plan. With no pedestrian crosswalk on Eton, Edwards said the neighborhood is "weirdly disconnected" from the rest of the Rail District.

"And the brewery will exacerbate the problems that already exist," she said. "Residents would be more welcoming if you took a holistic approach."

The defense

According to resident Dorothy Conrad, if the adjoining neighborhood has an issue with Eton Street, the neighborhood association there needs to take its problems to the city's traffic board — not take it up with a project such as the Griffin Claw.

Conrad said she believes the project can only make that side of town better for everyone.

"This facility will be an asset to your community and not the other way around," she said.

Several other nearby business owners, including Brian Bolyard from [Bolyard Lumber](#), also stood up to defend the plan.

"This will bring in more potential businesses, add traffic to existing businesses and add to the eclectic nature of Birmingham," said Bolyard, whose family owns the lumberyard on Eton Street.

Commissioners agreed and approved the plan unanimously, noting that the brewery's liquor license is reviewed every year. If it does turn out there are major problems with traffic or noise, that review will offer a forum in which to address them, commissioners said.