

Ad Hoc Adult Business Committee Meeting February 26, 2019

Statement by Andrea Richardson

Thank you for hearing my statement. I request that my testimony be entered into official exhibits for this meeting.

I want to start by briefly sharing some personal background information. For several years, my husband and I lived in an adjacent suburb of Wheaton. It was a perfectly fine town, where we enjoyed lower taxes, a much smaller house payment, and many suburban conveniences. With young children, we started to look around at educational opportunities and found, what we felt was an unmatched environment at Wheaton Montessori School. For years, we made the daily commute down Gary Ave so that our children could attend WMS and we found ourselves spending more and more time in this town we were growing to love. Five years ago, we “upsized” our home and accepted a much larger financial burden to build a new home in this community. We moved here for the same reasons that so many people choose this community; we enjoyed the amenities and year-round programming of the park district, the highly-rated and safe public schools, a wonderful church community, the easily accessible Prarie Path, neighborhoods that are walkable, and a family-friendly downtown that our kids could frequent independently with their friends to play putt-putt and grab ice cream. Said plainly, we could envision our kids growing up here and we felt comfortable.

Our kids are a bit older now and they have enjoyed many of the experiences we had hoped they would, but currently, I am far from comfortable. My community is not as safe as it was a year ago. When the “OPEN 24-hours” business with adult characteristics opened on Gary Ave within spitting distance of the two schools that our children attend and amongst several other consumer-facing businesses that we frequent, I took notice along with many other members of this community. I attended a previous hearing related to this business. I have contacted the county zoning officials several times to stay informed. I am here today to share my concerns and the subsequent impact this new business has had on my family’s day to day life.

Overall safety and criminal activity in that area have clearly changed. In ten years of driving this stretch of Gary Ave, I never once saw a police car on the west side of the street in the parking lot shared by Sullys. ^{Today} Police presence is noticeable at every time of day or night and has increased significantly. Without speculating as to the specific activity that is leading to the increased police presence, I have heard enough substantiated reports to simply avoid being in and around the roads and businesses in that area.

This is so unfortunate because it means that we no longer patronize businesses that we used to. We don't go to Wheaton Bowl on school holidays or snow days or our annual New Year's Eve gig with friends. We don't stop for gas on the corner and have stopped frequenting restaurants in the area. We did not allow our Wheaton North high-schooler to get a permit to park at Wheaton Bowl. Instead, he wakes up at 5:30 am leaves the house at 6:30 to get a spot on a side street. When another child asked if we could look into the Teen classes at the nearby Crossfit, that he could have easily gotten himself to on his bike, we had to say "No."

We even avoid the simple act of driving in that area, when we can. When you don't know who is going to be coming and going in that parking lot and what their physical, emotional, or mental state might be, it's just not worth the risk. I don't know if the person behind the wheel has been up all night working and under what conditions, I don't know if their evening did not transpire as they'd planned and they are leaving the business frustrated. I realize this might sound extreme to some people, but through my work, I am exposed to the research and statistics on Distracted Driving and the statistics on accidents and fatalities caused by Distracted Driving are alarming and climbing. Any number of circumstances, that did not exist a year ago, ^{could} ~~may~~ lead to an increase in distracted driving in that area. This includes fellow residents who are on the lookout for suspicious activity which is good, however, even that increases the risks for anyone traveling that corridor of Gary Ave or Geneva Rd.

I recognize that I appear here today seemingly as a single voice sharing the impact that this business has had on the life of my family over the past year. When in fact, I have lost count of the number of friends, neighbors, and community members that I have talked to that share the same concerns and have made similar, or even more extreme, concessions to their daily operations. Many of these individuals shared with me they would decline the opportunity to come forward publically out of fear or an abundance of caution that they or our community would be further targeted by associates of this business. My own husband questions the wisdom of having my name in public records. Please do not assume that the number of community members that you see at these hearings indicates that the majority of the community is OK that a business with adult characteristics is operational at its current location. Many people are simply afraid.

One of the things that I cherish about this community, is that we care about and care for each other, regardless if you lived here your whole life or have just moved in, or are just trying to make a living here. We care about the safety and welfare of everyone in this community and, for me and many others, that genuinely extends to the employees at this business.

Who is looking after the safety and welfare of the women employed there? Do we even know if they are employed legally? Is their workplace free of intimidation and exploitation? Is the business owner following all applicable labor laws? Do the employees have the right to refuse unsafe work? Are regular inspections done to ensure the work conditions are safe and free from health risks? As far as I can tell, we need to improve our ability to substantiate that basic human rights are being afforded to the employees of this establishment.

I feel strongly something must be done to address the additional safety risks that now exist in a very vulnerable area of our community. At the very least, this business, and businesses with similar characteristics, should be required to operate openly and in a transparent manner, and in a geographic location that does not provide disparate risk to community members and is suitable with safe working conditions for its employees and clientele.

My desire is that this committee will determine tangible steps to address businesses that have adult business characteristics that seek to operate in our community before more violent crimes are committed, before more establishments with similar profiles enter residential areas of our community, and certainly before the appeal of living in this community is permanently marred.

This concludes my prepared statement.