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URGENT

## Liquor license applicants getting another shot

Doug Ross  
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Businesses line Lincolnway in downtown Valparaiso, where the City Council is preparing to issue a downtown liquor license to one of four restaurants.

John J. Watkins, file, The Times

Doug Ross

**V**ALPARAISO — The next City Council meeting will feature restaurateurs making their pitches for a valuable downtown liquor license.

It's work that a city committee is tasked with doing before the applications are forwarded to the council for final approval, but that process broke down this time, City Attorney Patrick Lyp said, so the best solution is for a do-over at the council level.

"The thought process was that this was the fairest way to proceed for all parties involved," he said.

The committee includes a nonvoting member who is a restaurant professional to offer guidance as needed in evaluating the applicants. Not until after the March 24 committee meeting made its choice did Lyp learn about a clear conflict of interest, he said.

The nonvoting member had been involved in legal matters with the chef for one of the applicants, Lyp said. The member didn't know who the chef would be in advance but didn't say anything about the lawsuit at the meeting, Lyp said.

"You can slice and dice it, but at the end of the day, from an optics perspective, one applicant felt as if they weren't given a fair shake, and quite honestly I couldn't disagree with that perception," Lyp told the council Monday night. "You could nuance it to death as much as you want to. But again, what we try to have is an open, transparent process where win or lose, all the applicants feel as if they got a fair shake in the process."

See a day in the life of Michigan City Police Officer Brian Wright in the latest Riding Shotgun with NWI Cops installment.

The license became available when Sage Restaurant closed because of COVID-19 and didn't plan to reopen.

Lyp issued a request for proposals in early February and received four applications.

“That's the lowest ratio of licenses to applicants we've ever had, so it certainly shows these licenses are valuable and desired by our entrepreneurs locally,” he said.

The applicants included two existing restaurants — Elements Wine Bar and Scarpe — and two newcomers — Biruh's Kitchen and Le Bon Brasserie.

Dudley Nieto and Jason Gatzka propose to open Le Bon Brasserie, featuring French cuisine. Aman Wolde and Tigist Asnake hope to open Biruh's Kitchen, featuring Ethiopian cuisine. Elements Wine Bar, owned by Michelle Prosser, offers food and music with a Mississippi Delta flavor. Christopher and Katrina Shoemaker own Scarpe, which offers cuisine from all 20 regions of Italy.

Each of the applicants has been invited to make a 15-minute presentation to the council on April 26. For fairness, applicants won't be allowed in the room to see competitors' presentations, Lyp said.

They will be allowed to change their presentation but not the details in their application.

“For example, If you're pitching an Italian restaurant, you can't say now it's going to be a different type of restaurant,” he explained.

The state allowed 10 liquor licenses for downtown Valparaiso restaurants in 2005. Lyp has been involved in the process since 2014.

“I think by any metric they’ve been a success for the downtown, part of our overall growth,” he said.

After the council selects a winning applicant, either at the April 26 meeting or a subsequent one, Lyp wants the application process to be up for a potential overhaul.

“I’ve always appreciated the process of having a primary review and recommendation, particularly when there are multiple candidates,” Councilman Robert Cotton, D-2nd, said.

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