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Strip club is planned near bondage parlor

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Glenn Koenig / Los Angeles Times

A strip club is proposed in this building formerly occupied by Culver City Meat Co. The operator has decided to lop seven feet off the building to meet a requirement that adult businesses be at least 1,000 feet apart. It is 993 feet from a bondage parlor.

Despite opposition by L.A.'s Regent Square residents, it has received a temporary city business license.

By Martha Groves, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
October 12, 2007

For residents of a tiny pocket of the South Robertson Boulevard area of Los Angeles known as Regent Square and for nearby business owners, the slogan of the moment appears to be: Better the X-rated business you know than the one you don't.

That could explain why the Rev. Howard Dotson, former pastor of nearby Palms Westminster Presbyterian Church, recently found himself testifying at a public hearing by the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety that he preferred the existence of what city officials casually refer to as a bondage parlor in the neighborhood to the possible opening of a strip club featuring nude performers at the foot of the Robertson Boulevard offramp of the eastbound 10 Freeway.

"The irony has not been missed," Dotson said of his seemingly unlikely position. But the fact is, he said, that the Dominion club on Venice Boulevard, run by a proprietor named Lady Hillary, has been "so quiet we didn't even know they were there." The proposed strip club, on the other hand, is "just way too close to a residential area and to Hamilton High School."

"This is not a campaign against strip clubs," he said. "It's just that this venue is not appropriate."

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Despite rousing opposition from the neighborhood, however, it appears that the strip club could open soon. The Department of Building and Safety has issued a temporary permit to the business, identified in city paperwork as Skin Cabaret. And construction workers are busily finishing up demolition work to bring the club into compliance with zoning requirements.

After recently hearing of neighborhood concerns from Councilman Herb Wesson, the Los Angeles Police Commission, which regulates adult entertainment clubs, decided to schedule a public hearing. No date has yet been set, but LAPD Lt. Andre Dawson, a commission spokesman, said the building's owner would be encouraged to show up to hear the community's opinions.

A decision about whether to issue a permanent permit would come after that hearing.

According to city documents and Martin Jon Liberman, acting president of the South Robertson Neighborhoods Council, the owner of the building is Levi Litmanovich, chief executive of Golden West Trading Inc., a Los Angeles meat wholesaler. He did not return phone calls.

Litmanovich and the club operator have the 1st Amendment on their side, Dawson said.

"Unless there are mitigating circumstances as to why we should not issue the permit, it will be issued," he said.

For years, strip club operators have successfully used free-speech arguments to battle opposition, said attorney Roger Jon Diamond. He represents Woo Suk Yang, the applicant seeking to open the club at 3388 S. Robertson Blvd., in a building formerly occupied by Culver City Meat Co.

"My client researched the city very carefully . . . and found this location on Robertson Boulevard, which is close to Hamilton High, where I went many years ago," Diamond said. "I'm sure the Hamilton Yankees, being in support of the Constitution, will think very highly of this business."

Many residents of Regent Square, a neighborhood of modest bungalows across Venice Boulevard from the Helms Bakery complex, remain wary. They cite concerns about the potential for drug dealing, lewd behavior and increased traffic in an already heavily congested area at Robertson and Venice.

The site of the proposed strip club is just blocks from a planned Culver City station of the Expo Line, a recently begun light-rail line that will run through southwestern Los Angeles before heading west.

"None of us are happy about it," said Shari Hopper, the mother of infant twins, who lives a few blocks from the proposed club. "It's so bad for our property values. The kids who go to Hamilton High will be walking by it. You don't want your kids to be exposed to that.

Danny Harold, who owns one of four catering businesses that share a kitchen in the building next door to the proposed strip club, said he was not opposed to anybody earning a living. And he quipped that a strip club might make a better neighbor than Culver City Meat, which in the summer, he said, emanated a gag-inducing odor and clogged the block-long street with trucks.

Still, he signed a petition to keep the proposed strip club out, citing the lack of parking and potential vandalism by a late-night clientele. "With catering, we're

coming back here between midnight and 2 a.m.," Harold said. "That's a vulnerable time of day for this neighborhood."

Under Los Angeles' municipal code, adult businesses must be at least 1,000 feet apart. They also cannot be closer than 500 feet to a school, church, park or residentially zoned area. If the club's performers are nude, the business may not sell alcohol.

Those restrictions were adopted in the early 1980s after the Los Angeles City Council had spent many years debating how to handle adult businesses. The idea was to avoid creating concentrations of such businesses that could become hotbeds for criminal activity.

Nobody has sought to change the code, primarily because the 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the free-speech clause in the California Constitution require that the city allow adult businesses a reasonable opportunity to find locations for their clubs, theaters or cabarets.

As it happens, the proposed strip club is 993 feet from the Dominion club. As a result, the strip club operator has decided to lop seven feet off the building, a move that Diamond said should not be necessary.

Wesson said the city should let the administrative process run its course to allow all affected parties make their case.

"We have genuine concerns about how these types of businesses impact neighborhoods," he said in a statement.

If the city decides to allow the strip club to open, it "will be subject to the city's nuisance abatement laws to ensure its operations do not become a nuisance to the community."

Meanwhile, the Dominion club has issues of its own. Since 1974, it has operated with a massage parlor permit from the city. But an official with the Department of Building and Safety said inspectors recently concluded that the club was not a massage parlor and that sexual encounters were occurring there in violation of the permit.

The Dominion -- which features a saddle in a front room, rows of brightly colored ropes on hooks and a photo gallery of women in dominatrix attire -- has appealed, and a city zoning administrator plans to hold a hearing Nov. 1.

Until recently, the Dominion was advertising itself on its website as specializing in "female domination, bondage, spanking" and other activities. In recent days, it has eliminated that wording from its site.

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