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Aurora uproar

By Louise Hoffman Broach / The Citizen

AURORA - When Jim Orman signed a seven-year lease on the building that housed the Fargo Bar and Grill in 1998, he figured he would run the establishment until he was ready to retire.

But June 1, the Fargo will be taken over by the Aurora Foundation.

Wells College owns the building and has declined to renew Orman's lease, which would allow the foundation to manage the Fargo. The foundation, started by Wells alumna and philanthropist Pleasant Rowland, also runs the Aurora Inn, Pizzaurora, Dorie's Ice Cream shop and several other businesses in the village.

The foundation has invested millions of dollars in the village, but there are critics of their methods.

Orman, 58, said he's being forced out for a decision he's been told is in the college's best interest. It leaves him without an occupation, and it leaves Aurora without the neighborhood tavern on Main Street that he and two other independent business owners before him operated for decades.

"It's more than just a bar, it's a social center," said Orman, an Aurora native who gave up a job with Monroe County and moved back to Aurora full-time to operate the Fargo. "It caters to the needs of a small town."

Orman said when the foundation renovated the Fargo - some referred to it as Rowland's redecorating #- he was consulted about changes he wanted.

That's why he's disappointed the college is not renewing his lease. Originally the lease expired March 31, but Orman was granted a final two-

month extension.

Many have rallied in his favor. There have been petition drives and the village board drafted a letter to the foundation, asking that the decision be reconsidered. Four of the five members of the board signed the letter.

Katie Waller, who runs the foundation, said Wells College made the decision to end the relationship with Orman. She's looking ahead to setting up a stable transition; all six of the people who work for Orman have been asked to stay on.

"I don't anticipate changes," Waller said.

But some say it will not be the same without Orman.

"There is something rare, special and curiously appealing in the small town bar atmosphere of the Fargo," said village resident Laura Holland, who recently wrote a letter to Rowland, asking the foundation to leave the Fargo's operation under a lease agreement. "It is also raunchy, surprising and fun."

The argument about the Fargo brings into focus an uncomfortable position in which many Aurora residents have found themselves.

While they appreciate how Rowland's generosity has revitalized the village, they say it has threatened the security of existing merchants if they happen to rent space in college-owned buildings.

"It's our responsibility to use our properties to support the college," said Ann Rollo, Wells' vice president for external relations. "The foundation absorbs costs and losses and Wells gets the profits. It's an extraordinary gift of philanthropy."

Aurora resident and Fargo regular Jay O'Hearn views it differently. He sees Orman's operation of the establishment as being integral to what it has become. The foundation, O'Hearn said, could erode that through what he implied may be corporate-type decisions.

"For many in town, the Fargo is the heart and soul of the village, a reflection of the quirky uniqueness of Aurora," O'Hearn said. "Foundation

control of the Fargo would inexorably compromise its free-wheeling atmosphere and consequently degrade its special charm."

The letter from the village, O'Hearn hopes, "draws a line in the sand" for the foundation and where development is going.

Village board member Jim Chase said the letter to the foundation encourages locally operated businesses in Aurora.

"Not everything should be run by the foundation," he said. "The foundation has done tremendous things. I am in support of the way it made things look. But there should be an opportunity for local entrepreneurs to have a presence."

Like many people in Aurora, Chase works for Wells College, where he is director of facilities. Mayor Tom Gunderson is superintendent of buildings and grounds at Wells and George Farenthold is married to Wells College President Lisa Marsh Ryerson.

Chase said the connections to the college can put people in a difficult position, trying to balance community interests with college goals.

Farenthold didn't sign the letter because he doesn't find it to be the village's place to tell the college how to run its properties. He said it is better economically for the school to have the foundation underwrite businesses in college-owned buildings.

"The deal the foundation has with the college is to rehab properties to be a functional revenue stream for the college," he said.

He also has an issue with the idea that only someone local should run the Fargo.

"How do you define local?" he asked, noting he's lived in Aurora 10 years. There are people who have come to Aurora before and after who claim to have as much of a stake in the community, he pointed out.

Waller's hope is the community will wait and see how the Fargo operates under new management.

"The hope is they will be happy with the end result," she said.

Orman, meanwhile, said he's not sure what he will do next.

"This was my future," he said.

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