

The Post-Standard

Aurora residents draw line at Fargo plan

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By Dave Tobin

Staff writer

Want a glass of wine at the Fargo bar in Aurora? Pick a color.

"You're not going to get a wine list," said Kristine Gans, a Fargo bartender. "You're going to get, 'Pink, white or red?'"

Some in Aurora wonder if this kind of unpretentious ambience, and lots more, will change when the Aurora Foundation takes over management of this small village's only watering hole on June 1.

Wells College, which owns the Fargo property, has chosen not to renew the lease of current Fargo owner James Orman. The tavern is being handed to the Aurora Foundation LLC, a company set up by Wells alumna Pleasant Rowland, to renovate and manage Wells' commercial properties.

Aurora, a village on Cayuga Lake, is home to Wells College, which has a commanding presence in this community of 720 residents. News of a change at the Fargo has generated outrage, letters of concern and phone calls to the college and the foundation, a 200-signature petition - and two bumper stickers.

At issue is more than the fate of a bar. It's evolved into a community-wide questioning of the influence and approach of Rowland, the community's wealthy benefactor, who rarely appears in public to discuss her actions and declines media interviews.

Since 2001, Rowland, a native of Madison, Wis., has spent tens of millions of dollars out of her own pocket renovating Wells' campus and its commercial buildings - \$18 million in just the last three years, according to tax records. She has torn down some, moved and rebuilt others. Through her Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation, she pays operating expenses for businesses she runs, and directs all profits to Wells College.

Along the way, she has encountered resistance at nearly every turn. Wells College fought one legal battle over her plans for the historic Aurora Inn, when a local group tried unsuccessfully to block sweeping changes.

So far, she has prevailed, sprucing up Main Street, professionalizing businesses, raising prices, and recently earning a six-page photo spread for Wells' Aurora properties in the March/April issue of Brides magazine. Just outside the village, she

spent \$5.1 million to buy the cash-strapped MacKenzie-Childs Ltd. company, preventing it from going under and saving more than 240 jobs.

Rowland's efforts have earned support from village and college leaders, business owners and many residents, who have welcomed her philanthropy, and given her a chance to prove her vision for the village.

After graduating from Wells, Rowland did not return to Aurora for decades. She founded Pleasant Co., the enormously successful maker of American Girl dolls that she eventually sold to Mattel for \$700 million, and created the Pleasant T. Rowland Foundation, which now funds her philanthropy.

But recent news that her foundation will take control of the village's only tavern has roused anger and protests from many who previously gave Rowland unqualified support. New bumper stickers display the mood - "Keep Aurora Weird," and "Aurora Was Pleasant [before]."

"The shine has worn off," said Frank Zimdahl, Aurora fire chief, who had been a staunch Rowland supporter. "She has done a lot of wonderful stuff. But it's reached the point where people are saying, 'Wait a second. What's happening here?'"

Wells College employs nearly 200 people, helping boost median household income in the village of Aurora to \$57,222 in the last census, the most of any municipality in Cayuga County. Many employees and former employees of the college live in the village, and the village government is run by people with Wells connections.

Village trustee George Farenthold is married to Wells College President Lisa Marsh Ryerson. Mayor Tom Gunderson is Wells superintendent of buildings and grounds. Assistant Mayor James Chase is Wells director of custodial services. Village trustee Ken Zabriskie is brother to Steve Zabriskie, who for the past 10 years has been chairman of Wells College board of trustees. Village trustee Janet Murphy is a Wells graduate.

On the Fargo issue, all but Farenthold have asked Wells College in writing to renew Orman's lease.

As village officials, Gunderson, Chase, Ken Zabriskie and Murphy sent a letter to Ryerson, expressing concern over "loss of the Fargo as our villagers know it . . . we are witnessing an incredible makeover of our hometown," they wrote. "We need to stand in support of preserving some of our hometown culture, a culture that simply can't be ignored or altered to center around one central theme or influence."

Steve Zabriskie was among nearly 200 who signed a letter to Rowland, supporting the continued ownership of the Fargo by Orman.

"People like their place," said Zabriskie. "It's like an old bathrobe and a pair of

slippers. It's the people that make the place."

Wells College officials say that having the Aurora Foundation manage the bar will ensure steady, consistent management, and increase revenue for the college. Foundation officials have asked Fargo employees to continue working at the Fargo.

Wells College officials note the Aurora Foundation already has a strong interest in the Fargo. Two years ago, the foundation paid to renovate the bar.

Orman, who has leased the bar for seven years, pays \$580 a month to rent the space. He would not say what his annual profit was.

The Fargo has had a string of owners since opening in 1939. It has a dark, pub-like atmosphere, serves lunch, and at night serves burgers, wings, and leftover lunch specials. It can get rowdy and loud, with patrons spilling out onto the deck in back, the front porch, the street.

Wells College and Aurora Foundation officials insist the Fargo's atmosphere won't change. Regular patrons aren't so sure. They have had three years to witness Rowland's work, and her distinctive mark is too tidy, too perfect, too consistent for them to trust that it won't be laid on the Fargo.

Rowland rarely personally addresses concerns about her plans. Her local spokeswoman, Katie Waller, questions why people are so upset about the Fargo. "The suspicions - I guess that's what you'd call it, suspicions - or rumors abounding are so not true," she said.

One resident sees it a different way.

"You need some grubbiness in a village," said Sheila Edmunds, village historian. "If everything is uniform, we might as well live in Disneyland."