

## Roland Park Shopping Center drops bank drive-thru plan

*Popular eatery must leave after 27 years; new restaurant coming in*

By Larry Perl  
 lperl@patuxent.com

Posted 9/09/10

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*(Enlarge) Anita Ward pops champagne to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Roland Park Bakery and Deli in January of 2008. Now, she's being forced out. Ward is a casualty of big changes planned at the Roland Park Shopping Center, which is thought to be the nation's oldest. (File photo /2008)*

The Roland Park Shopping Center, believed to be the nation's oldest, might undergo a major overhaul -- and at least one longtime tenant would be forced out as a result. But community leaders and the architect representing the center's owners worry about the potential impact on traffic, parking and the fire station next door.

Newly updated plans for the Roland Park Shopping Center, 4800 Roland Ave., include an unidentified new restaurant, which would be less upscale and more casual than the center's best-known tenant, Petit Louis. The Messenger first reported that plan, as well as one for a drive-thru for Bank of America. But the drive-thru idea has been dropped, shopping center co-owner Tricia Ward has since told the Sun.

"We decided it's not a viable option. We don't need the controversy," said Ward, who with her father, Jim, owns the shopping center.

Several other tenants are leaving, including a Long & Foster real estate office and a popular, longtime breakfast and lunch spot, Roland Park Bakery and Deli. That eatery is being forced out by the shopping center's owners because the new restaurant doesn't want the competition, according to architect Vincent Greene, who is representing Jim and Tricia Ward. The owner of Roland Park Bakery and Deli, Anita Ward, is Tricia Ward's aunt, Greene said. He said Tricia Ward is helping Anita Ward look for a new space to lease in Roland Park.

The Wards are also planning major renovations to the center, which has three floors and a basement, said Greene, whose firm, Vincent Greene Architects, is located in the center. But since the center is historic, any renovations or redevelopment plans would need the approval of the city's Commission for Architectural and Historic Preservation. Greene said planned renovations would make the center more accurate historically.

The center opened in 1896, and is thought to be the nation's first. Local historians have described it in books as one of the oldest, if not the oldest, depending on one's definition of a shopping center. Well-known former tenants over the years have included a Baskin-Robbins ice cream shop, O'Malley's Antiques, Victor's Market and Morgan and Millard, an iconic pharmacy, luncheonette and restaurant known as "The Morgue."

But the older the center gets, the costlier the upkeep is, and the Wards, who bought the center in the mid-1970s, are worried about its long-term viability, Greene told the Roland Park Civic League on Sept. 2.

Greene's presentation was designed to elicit feedback and sound out the board about whether such a project could win the community's blessing. Board members were open-minded and intrigued about the possibility of a new, lower priced restaurant in town. But they said concerns about traffic and parking would have to be addressed.

President Ian MacFarlane called the renovations and restaurant plans "fantastic -- but not at the expense of everybody going up in arms in the area."

It's no sure bet a drive-thru would have been allowed. be allowed. The center is under a restrictive community covenant, and Greene said he found old paperwork suggesting a drive-thru was not one of the permitted uses in the center.

If nothing else, the back could be redeveloped as a parking lot, though the owners wouldn't like that because it wouldn't generate any revenue, Greene said.

League members were concerned about the fate of Anita Ward, whose eatery would have to move by the end of the year. Ward, who in January of 2008 celebrated the eatery's 25th anniversary and served free champagne mimosas to breakfast customers, said she is surprised, but understands "with the economy the way it is."

But she wants to stay in Roland Park, because, "My customers are my family."

League members at the meeting were also worried about traffic and parking, as well as whether the drive-thru would impede firefighters and paramedics.

Former league president Phil Spevak suggested the center use a trolley service to take restaurant patrons to and from their cars at a location like Poly-Western's parking lot. Greene called that "a great idea."

Greene said there has been discussion of starting a valet service, but he hasn't found any nearby businesses that are willing to let the center use parking spaces. He said he has not been able to reach officials of the nearby Baltimore Country Club property.

Greene told board members the new restaurant would not have live music. While he would not identify the restaurant, he said, "I can tell you that it is not a sports bar."

Greene told the Messenger that the restaurant is not part of a chain.

Greene said he would try to bring officials of the new restaurant to the next league meeting Oct. 7 to discuss their plans.

The Sun contributed to this updated story.

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