

BJ's Liquor License Bid in Framingham Sparks Opposition

The owner of a small liquor shop in Framingham fears a license transfer to neighboring BJ's Wholesale Club could spell doom.

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Fifth Ave Liquors along Old Connecticut Path has been in business in Framingham for about 50 years. (Google Maps)

FRAMINGHAM, MA — A bid by the BJ's Wholesale Club in Framingham to buy a liquor license has ignited a showdown involving two small, longtime liquor stores in town.

In recent weeks, BJ's entered into an agreement to buy the liquor license held by Route 9 Wine & Spirits, which would allow the big box wholesale store to sell wine, liquor and beer at its Framingham store. But the owner of Fifth Ave Liquors — which is literally next door to BJ's in the Stop & Shop plaza — fears the transfer would be catastrophic for his business.

Fifth Ave owner Paul Morganti said that the recent opening of Wegman's and Total Wine in Natick already took a chunk out of his business. He's opposing the BJ's transfer, in part, because it would concentrate liquor licenses in a small area.

"Putting two liquor licenses 100 feet apart does not serve the public need," Morganti said.

Morganti has been supported in opposing BJ's request by a number of citizens. Some wrote letters to the Board of Licensing Commissioners asking them to deny the transfer, with one calling it a "chain store massacre." The matter has even attracted residents outside the city — Sherborn Wine & Spirits owner Kathryn Coughlin in a letter cited recent cases where towns have denied transfers based on public need.

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BJ's was supposed to go before the Framingham Board of Licensing Commissioners on Monday for a public hearing on the transfer. BJ's is seeking permission to postpone that hearing until early October.

A representative from BJ's did not respond to a request for comment about the postponement. But opposition to the transfer has been big enough that the Framingham mayor's office put out a press release over the weekend about the public hearing.

Gene Richard, the attorney representing BJ's in the transfer, said on Monday night that he had been feeling sick recently, hindering his ability to prepare for the public hearing. But he also acknowledged that an emerging campaign to oppose the transfer is a factor.

"Since hearing of that campaign, I think it deserves an appropriate response from the applicant," Richard said. The Board of Licensing Commissioners postponed the hearing until Oct. 5.

Route 9 Wine & Spirits owner Ercole Ubaldino said that BJ's approached him this year about possibly selling his license. Ubaldino agreed to a sale, he said, because he's approaching age 70 and ready to retire. He's owned Route 9 Wine & Spirits since the late 1990s, and previously owned Kentucky Spirits in Natick.

Ubaldino said Fifth Ave could still compete with BJ's since it would be offering different products, and without the requirement of buying a membership.

Morganti, whose family has owned Fifth Ave for about 50 years, says that his store offers a personal touch and a curated selection of items, particularly wine. That could all go away with a big-box liquor store next door.

"It's just not in the best interest of the neighborhood or the city to grant that license and then put ours in jeopardy," he said.