

**The City of Lake Forest**  
**Plan Commission**  
**Proceedings of the October 18, 2023 Meeting**

A meeting of the Lake Forest Plan Commission was held on Wednesday, October 18, 2023, at 6:30 p.m.

Commission members present: Chairman Dixon and Commissioners Jamie Moorhead, Mark Pasquesi, and Lisa Nehring

Commissioners absent: Louis Pickus and Barrett Davie (One Vacant Position)

Staff present: Catherine Czerniak, Director of Community Development and Jen Baehr, Planner

**1. Introduction of Commissioners and staff and review of meeting procedures.**

Chairman Dixon introduced the members of the Commission and reviewed the meeting procedures followed by the Commission.

**2. Consideration of the minutes of the September 13, 2023 meeting.**

Consideration of the minutes of the September 13, 2023 Plan Commission meeting was postponed.

**3. Public Hearing and Action: Consideration of a request for a Special use Permit for "Tocco", an Italian restaurant in an existing tenant space located partially within 150 feet of property zoned for residential use. The property is located at 950 N. Western Avenue, in Westwood Center.**

**Property Owner: Westwood Center, LLC (Todd Altounian, Nicole Altounian, Jennifer Bianchi and James Altounian II)**

**Presented by: Bruno Abate, tenant and owner of Tocco**

Chairman Dixon asked the Commission for any conflicts of interest or Ex Parte contacts. Hearing none, he swore in all those intending to speak on the petition. He invited a presentation from the petitioner.

Mr. Abate stated that he was born in Italy and came to this Country 25 years ago. He provided some background on his early years noting that he opened his first restaurant in the West Loop in 2000. He stated that the restaurant was very successful. He noted his involvement in a prison reform program that benefitted from his experience in the restaurant business. He stated that in 2009, he opened Tocco in Wicker Park noting that location was not as successful. He stated that restaurants are his passion and explained that his approach is to make people happy. He stated that he is not a corporation, just an individual and stated that he is not greedy. He stated that when he closed his

downtown restaurants, he intended to get out of the restaurant business. He explained that when he moved to Winnetka, people asked him to open a restaurant there. He stated that although the restaurant business can be difficult, he opened Tocco in Winnetka in November 2019. He stated that the community and Village supported him during the pandemic with takeout, gift certificates, and allowed him to close down the street for outdoor dining. He said that residents of Lake Forest who are his customers at the Winnetka restaurant, have asked him to open a restaurant here. He said he found a great location and a great landlord. He stated that great people working together and make things work. He stated his intention to buildout a beautiful restaurant in Westwood Court. He stated that he wants to be part of the Lake Forest community and will support local groups and events like the police and the kids. He stated that his intention is to make the community better. He stated that he and the people who have worked for him for 20 years have culinary skills and make everything by hand, every day. He stated his intention to bring in a chef from Italy who is a good friend. He stated that he himself will be the conductor to make all aspects of the restaurant work. He stated that people will talk about the restaurant and more people will come to the community. He stated that the floor plan presented to the Commission is preliminary and requires further study and refinement. He stated that if space permits, he would like to offer a chef's table concept for 15 to 20 diners at a time. He stated that in warm weather, dining will be available on the courtyard in the middle of Westwood Court. He stated that preparation of fresh pasts will occur on site, in Westwood Court. He stated that the restaurant will be chic and simple. He added that he is obsessed with cleanliness.

Ms. Czerniak reviewed that the request for a Special Use Permit for Tocco is before the Commission because the restaurant is proposed partially within 150 feet of a residential zoning district. She stated that the new restaurant is proposed in Westwood Court, the existing commercial development located on the southwest corner of Western Avenue and Woodland Road. She stated that the development has been the site of restaurants for many years but noted that in recent years, under new ownership, the development has undergone improvements inside and out. She stated that although today, several restaurants are located in the development, the City no longer receives regular complaints from neighboring residents. She acknowledged that the City has received a small number of complaints about increased traffic on Western Avenue due to several new restaurants opening in the area. She stated that Westwood Court has the advantage of an on site parking lot, parking underneath the building, public parking on Western Avenue, and the public parking lots within a short walking distance on the east side of the railroad tracks. She stated that there are always available parking spaces in the Central Business District. She stated that Tocco is proposed in the former King Maa Space and will extend into the former Michael's barber shop space. She noted that the space is a little smaller that desired by Mr. Abate, however with some creativity, the landlord is working with him to make the space work. She stated that restrooms will be located upstairs and will be accessible by the new glass enclosed stairway and elevator. She stated that the restaurant will have seating for about 60 people adding that the final floor plan is still being developed. She stated that in warmer weather, seating will be available in the interior courtyard. She stated that a number of conditions were put in place for Westwood Court when the other restaurants were

approved. She stated that the conditions are detailed in the staff report with a recommendation that the conditions apply to Tocco as well. She stated that the conditions prohibit parking on residential streets by either employees or customers. She pointed out that if the restaurant was located a bit further away from the residential zoning districts, no Special Use Permit would be required. She stated that Tocco will front on Western Avenue, away from the residential properties to the west. She stated that the staff report offers findings in support of a recommendation for approval of the Special Use Permit for the Commission's consideration.

Chairman Dixon invited questions from the Commission.

In response to questions from Commissioner Moorhead, Ms. Czerniak acknowledged that with the restaurants in Westwood Court and Sophia Steak, there is more congestion and demand for parking spaces in the area. She stated however that the City does not receive complaints other than that the valet attendants should wear bright colored vests. She stated that the restaurants benefit from the proximity to the expansive public parking lot parking located about a block away, on the east side of the railroad tracks, just south of Woodland Road. She acknowledged that there is an inherent conflict between having an increasingly vibrant Central Business District and minimizing traffic and activity in the core area. She noted that there are an increasing number of residents living within walking distance to the restaurants on north Western Avenue.

In response to questions from Commissioner Moorhead, Mr. Abate pointed out that there are more than 40 parking spaces under the Westwood Court building.

In response to questions from Commissioner Nehring, Mr. Abate stated that he would like to open for lunch but first will research the demand for lunch service in the community. He stated that if valet service is offered, it will likely be located near the entrance of the underground garage door. He stated that the restaurant will offer subtle background music.

In response to questions from Commissioner Nehring, Ms. Czerniak stated that liquor licenses are under the purview of the City Council adding that alcohol can be served during the day and in fact is offered during the day, including with breakfast, at several restaurants in the community.

In response to questions from Commissioner Nehring, Mr. Altounian stated that through the lease agreements with the various businesses in Westwood Court, the courtyard will be primarily designated for use by Tocco. He confirmed that Duffer's and Donati's are under common ownership adding that those leases do not include designated outdoor space. He stated that any outdoor music will be at levels consistent with the limitations in the City Code. He stated that he would like to offer pick up service for customers but stated that he will need to study the floor plan and the kitchen layout to determine if it is workable. He stated that Tocco will not offer in house delivery service.

In response to questions from Commissioner Nehring, Mr. Abate stated that subtle background music, not loud music, will be played in the restaurant.

Hearing no further questions from the Commission, Chairman Dixon thanked Mr. Abate for bringing his passion and wonderful restaurant to Lake Forest. He stated that the community is looking forward to the opening of Tocco. He asked that the Commission's recommendation clearly articulate that music is permitted consistent with the recent Code amendment recommended by the Commission and approved by the Council. He suggested to staff that with the increased activity at the north end of Western Avenue, the City should reconsider the lighting levels in the area noting that low lighting levels can make it challenging to cross the street. He invited public comment, hearing none, he closed the public hearing and invited final questions or comments from the Commission. Hearing none, he invited a motion.

Commissioner Nehring made a motion to recommend approval of a Special use Permit for "Tocco", an Italian restaurant in an existing tenant space in Westwood Court at 950 N. Western Avenue and located partially within 150 feet of property zoned for residential use. She stated that the motion adopts the findings detailed in the staff report and incorporates the conditions of approval as recommended in the report with an additional reference that music, outdoor speakers, are permitted consistent with the parameters of the recently approved Code amendment.

The motion was seconded by Commissioner Pasquesi and approved by a vote of 4 to 0.

#### **4. Additional public comment on non-agenda items**

There was no public comment on non-agenda items.

#### **5. Additional information from staff.**

Ms. Czerniak stated that staff is in contact with members of the Iosue project team and encouraging modification and a scaling down of the plan for redevelopment of the southeast corner of Waukegan and Everett Roads. She stated her expectation that the petition will return to the Commission at the next meeting.

In response to Ms. Czerniak's request for comments on the draft meeting calendar for 2024, the Commission directed amending the schedule to avoid a meeting on Valentine's Day.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine Czerniak  
Director of Community Development