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Allentown art gallery gets OK for new uses

Allentown zoning board says the Alternative Gallery can broaden its offerings.

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By Emily Opilo, Of The Morning Call
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They came poised for a fight, but left in celebration.

The Allentown Zoning Hearing Board voted unanimously Monday to expand the allowable uses for the Alternative Gallery on Fourth Street, putting to rest concerns about uses of the space and prompting some spirited applause from many artists in attendance.

The gallery, part of a larger mixed-use arts building in the 700 block of Fourth Street, just north of Tilghman Street, offers a variety of traditional and performance art displays for artists who have studios in the building as well as for visiting artists.

Uses have included children's art programs, documentary films, interpretive dance, live music and theater performances, said Gene DiPalma, the property's manager.

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Each of those uses has been offered for several months, but recently use of the building was called into question by a member of the city's zoning staff, prompting gallery officials to curtail their use of the space.

More than 40 artists and patrons of the gallery packed City Council chambers on Monday in support of an application for expanded use of the gallery. It would include theater, poetry, films, children and youth art educational programs, art auctions and limited community-based neighborhood programs including band music and dancing.

The gallery can hold up to 550 people based on fire codes, but operators restrict that to 175 people to minimize the impact on the largely residential neighborhood that surrounds the building, DiPalma said.

Despite the dense neighborhood, neighbors have not complained about parking or noise in the area, and many attended a recent block party hosted by the venue, DiPalma said. For events that are large, managers make arrangements with area businesses to provide additional off-street parking, he said.

Of the people who attended Monday's meeting, no one objected to the expansion.

Zoning board member Scott Unger said there had been concerns in the past when the gallery was first approved. Neighbors were worried about its impact on the surrounding community. It was "satisfying" to see no objectors at Monday's meeting, he said.

"I think that's a considerable testament to this operator," he said. "They are mindful, not just mindful, but inclusive of the neighborhood."

Board Chairman Dan McCarthy said at first blush the proposed uses seemed broad, but the testimony from building managers showed that the uses were actually carefully regulated, he said.

Board member Michael Engle joined the rest of the board in voting 3-0 in favor of expanding the uses for the gallery. A condition was added requiring that a local property manager, such as DiPalma, continue to operate the gallery if the ownership ever changes hands.

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