

Opinions & Ideas

When business is our business

A legendary bit of Minneapolis bohemianism loses its lease and customers rally to offer support, and a local health club is shut down for renovation: 100 employees lose their jobs and the club's members cry "foul."

Two stories reported in this issue are remarkable for their similar themes, and considerable differences.

If you listen to what people involved in both stories say, we are at risk for losing unique and precious establishments. As a community, we need to decide if there is something inherently valuable about such places. When an environment is created that has its own uniqueness and culture and becomes part of the fabric of the city, are we all better off? We think so.

That said, the two situations are quite different. Jason McLean, owner of the Loring, has had more than his share of troubles in his 15-year tenure at the café. He's had a long-turgid relationship with his own employees — triggering an organizing effort that fell short and, more recently, firings of long-time employees. Labor organizations around town will be hard-pressed to take up his

cause. The service lapses at the Loring, which have improved in recent months, have also besmirched the restaurant's reputation. As one patron put it, "you can't even get drunk there. And his run-ins with health inspectors and difficulties meeting financial commitments should have been wake-up calls; as a renter, he was at risk long before his lease was cancelled.

All of that is not to diminish what McLean's created at the Loring. Perhaps he's a genius or just very lucky, but the result of a great setting and great concept has been — at times — magical. Its bohemian carelessness remains its greatest charm, and refreshing in a society that's increasingly homogenized, franchised, and watered-down. You're never quite sure what you'll get at the Loring: suburbanites in for the latest Guthrie musical mangle with goth. You might not take your mother there, but if you want romance, or have some out-of-town visitors who need to know how cool Minneapolis is, that's where you go.

On the other side of town, you'll not likely find goth at the Calhoun Beach Club; nonetheless it's a place where neighborhood residents rub sweaty elbows with the powerful and well connected. That members feel a sense of ownership (and are willing to take up the cause of the workers) is a tribute to the family atmosphere that's developed over its 20-plus years as a health club. The members want to maintain the culture that sets it apart from health club chains.

In either case, there's a sense that the greater community has a voice in what — for all intents — is a decision about a private business relationship. The message for those who are making these decisions: you might be a business, but you're still part of this community.

What do we risk in the uncertain fates of the Loring and Calhoun Beach athletic club? The loss of places that give the city color and life and personality. When the Becky's or Charlie's of the city go away,

something is irretrievably lost. We love D'Amico restaurants, but do we really need another one? The Loring is an original.

Loring Corners' owner, Joe Whitney, has refused to state publicly his reasons for ousting the café; likewise, AIMCO, which owns the athletic club, has remained mum despite pleas from its membership. That's their right, but we wish they would understand their obligation to tell us more. Make the case about why it's time for a change. We are frustrated that, in either case, we are hearing only one side of the story.

The bottom line may be, unfortunately, the bottom line. Change happens, and it's possible there are sound business reasons for the actions taken — but they need to be spelled out. As a community that believes we have a stake, we are owed at least that. As Sarah Janecek, staunch Republican, says, "we have a different political culture in this state."

Until we hear those reasons, the community has the right — and obligation — to fight the loss of the places that make our neighborhoods unlike all the others.

SWJ Opinion

Southwest Journal staff went to Penn Cycle, 710 W. Lake Street to talk to the mechanics giving bikes a spring tune-up

Talking about Design:
Where's the Discussion?

