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The battle of Indiana Ave.

Facing a \$600,000 debt, Vietnam vets museum wants cafe owner out

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What started out as a conflict between landlord and tenant has erupted into an all-out war at the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in the South Loop.

Jorge Armando, owner of the Café Society, a restaurant in the lobby of the museum at 1801 S. Indiana, filed a lawsuit late last year after the museum served him an eviction notice for allegedly not paying his rent on time.

Armando denies the charges and members of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance, a newly-found neighborhood group, argue that financial problems have prompted the museum's board of directors to try moving in a high-rent tenant to help pay off its debt. Armando's lease, however, runs through 2013, so the museum must move him out before leasing the space to the owner of **Black Orchid** Supper Club at 230 West North.

Jim Holtzman, treasurer and board member for the museum, acknowledged that the museum is about \$600,000 in debt. He also said **Black Orchid** owner Marc Curtis donated \$20,000 to the museum in late 2006 and more recently loaned the museum \$60,000.

"Clearly the guy who runs the **Black Orchid** is taking a very serious interest in the South Loop," Holtzman said. "He has offered a loan. It's a mortgage against the building to help ensure his partnership with the building."

He said the loan would help pay operating costs for the building while board members negotiate the lease agreement with Curtis.

Jeff Ayersman, a board member of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance, said he's concerned that if the building is leased with an option to purchase, then Curtis will simply pay off the \$1.7 million it owes to the city when the lease runs out in 2013 and in turn own the building outright. Neighbors worry that if the building falls into private ownership, the museum also could be evicted.

"They are trying to do the lease agreement because it keeps them from having to pay back the \$1.7 million debt," Ayersman said.



Jorge Armando, owner of Café Society, says the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum is trying to push his restaurant out of the building.

File photo

He said representatives of the neighborhood group recently met with members of the board of directors and were told they can seek alternative proposals. But Holtzman said the museum is "moving forward" with the lease proposal with Curtis.

Ayersman also argues that putting in an events space at the museum would violate the lease agreement mandating that 75 percent of the building be used for displaying art.

"We are all trying to make sure this museum succeeds," Holtzman said. "We want to make it a cultural oasis in the middle of a very rapidly growing area. We are not violating our agreements. Our goal is to be a partner to the neighborhood and the area. We think the museum was put here for a reason and we want to keep it there."

Meanwhile, another battle is brewing between Café Society and the museum. Armando said that earlier this month, the museum sent in inspectors from the health department to search for food violations and mold.

Building manager Jerry Kykisz recently closed the bathroom to the museum for several days because he said leaking water from the restaurant caused the wall separating the bathroom and kitchen to warp.

He said that he removed the drywall in the bathroom and sprayed it with disinfectant because of mold caused by the leak. Kykisz, who has worked at the museum since it opened in 1996, also called out city inspectors from the Department of Health in mid-March to inspect the wall and what he said were unsanitary conditions in the kitchen. Armando was issued citations for dirty ventilation systems, refrigerators in need of repair, leaking water and a spider web in the dining room, Armando said.

He said he believes that inspectors were called because the museum is trying to run him out of the building.

Armando, who immigrated to the United States from Columbia in 1979, said Kykisz also has voiced racial epithets at him and told customers that his food is rotten.

"He said that we should go back to Mexico and called us wet backs," Armando said.

Kykisz denied the charges of racism. "That's a bunch of B.S.," he said. "Jorge is excitable. I have never said any of that. I have never in my life made racial implications."

Armando said Kykisz also took a photograph of raw chicken defrosting in a closet, enlarged it and displayed it in the foyer of the museum where customers access the café and dining room.

In an email to Armando, Kykisz said he would "offer it for sale as a limited edition print titled 'Naked Orgy', with the proceeds going to repair some of the damage you have caused. I may also hang it in the windows of the [northwest] corner [of the building] if I get a good response."

"This is an art museum; I am a photographer and I take pictures here, and sometimes I put those pictures on display," Kykisz coyly said in an interview. "I showed it to [Armando] a number of times, and I said it is an unsanitary practice."

But Armando said he was using the closet as a staging area to defrost the meat and that he considers the photo another form of intimidation.

"I am very afraid that the museum, in the hands of Jerry Kykisz, will do something to tamper with evidence and damage our food in order to prove that we are not a good restaurant," Armando said. "But the community knows otherwise."