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Entrepreneurs behind Lawrence Hall on Butler Street announce legal victory and are pushing forward

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Now nearly four years since they first proposed the project, Lawrenceville residents Brett Minarik and Phoebe Fraser are pledging to push forward with their Lawrence Hall food hall redevelopment of an old warehouse building at 4609 Butler St.

The partners on the venture announced on their website that they won a legal victory in a March decision by the Commonwealth Court, allowing the redevelopment to go forward after three years of legal challenges stemming from the property's lack of parking.

While the project generated support from community organizations Lawrenceville Corp. and



TIM SCHOOLEY

A Lawrenceville couple plan to turn this circa-1900 building at 4609 Butler Street into a new food hall for the neighborhood. The 6,000-square-foot building has long been used mostly for storage but its past include a one-time use as a theater and a garage

Lawrenceville United, the legal challenge of the food hall redevelopment of the building came from the owners of The Abbey on Butler Street and Lawrenceville resident Ray Czachowski, the only plaintiff named in the Commonwealth Court decision.

The March 2 decision overrules the June 2019 decision by Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas Judge Joseph James, which overturned the Pittsburgh Zoning Board of Adjustment's 2018 granting of a special exception to the project.

Working with a building originally constructed around 1900 that takes up its entire site, the partners of Lawrence Hall pledged a host of measures to overcome the building's inherent parking limitations along the traditional business district.

That included incentivizing staff and customers to use forms of transportation other than personal automobiles, providing off-site parking, among others.

President Judge Emerta Mary Hannah Leavitt wrote in the Commonwealth Court decision that the ZBA's granting of the special exception for Lawrence Hall was well founded by the evidence.

"We hold that the Zoning Board's findings made in support of its grant of the special exception for an alternative parking plan and its grant of a variance from the parking lot's setback requirement were supported by substantial evidence," she wrote. "The trial court erred in reversing the decision of the zoning board."

The owners of the property pursuing the Lawrence Hall food hall project provided an update on the decision with a sign on the front of the building that included the url for the website.

In their update, they praised the decision as well as a change in standards by the city alleviating some of the parking requirements they faced before.

The panel of judges from the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania rejected the misleading and unjust claims made against us," reads the unsigned announcement. "Additionally, as we were waiting for this ruling, the City of Pittsburgh took the initiative to significantly reduce the minimum parking requirements for

restaurants. This is a huge step in the right direction for 21st century city planning and means we now have more parking than we would have been required to provide under the current code."

Noting that parking remains an ongoing challenge in Lawrenceville, they reiterated their strategies to go forward with Lawrence Hall with mitigation efforts that include prioritizing the hiring of employees within walking distance, providing discounts to customers to ride bikes or take Uber, and paying for the public transit costs for all employees who need it.

The original plan called for taking a 6,000-square-foot building with some historic features, such as wood beams and red brick, and outfitting it with a bar and stalls for various vendors to provide a variety of different food offerings.

While the venture is going forward, Lawrence Hall has now opted to seek donations to help overcome the costs of its legal challenge and go forward with building out the space for the food hall redevelopment.

Minarik wasn't available to comment further and no other details were provided as to when construction might begin on Lawrence Hall or when it might open.

It's a location in a very busy stretch of Butler Street for restaurants and other food service, with La Gourmandine Bakery a few doors down, The Abbey, expanding with a new outdoor bar a short walk away, and restaurants such as Walter's BBQ and Southern Kitchen, North Park Lounge and others all within close proximity.

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