

IN THE PAPER
TODAY



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRESLER

Plans: *If all goes as planned by the co-owners, Cowley's on Grand River could become a two-story Irish pub that would include a casual dining atmosphere and some of the traditional charm of the Farmington landmark.*

Landmark

Cowley's co-owners have dream for 'authentic' 1940s Irish pub

■ They have some hoops to jump through but the co-owners of Cowley's Old Village Inn hope to turn the restaurant/bar into a pub, perhaps with two stories. Parking will be an issue, as will the question of whether the building can physically hold two stories.

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Cowley's Old Village Inn co-owners Monday night dipped their toes into the giant green hoop they'll need to

jump completely through – that is, if they want to realize their dream transformation of the downtown Farmington landmark into an "authentic" Irish pub.

During the Farmington Planning

Commission meeting, Greg, Michael and Patrick Cowley presented their concept for a more upscale "Cheers-like" business, likely to be renamed John Cowley & Sons Irish Tavern.

Their vision – to cost an undetermined amount – includes adding a second story or deck, valet parking and a casual dining atmosphere while maintaining some of the traditional charm the 3,200-square-foot

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family-owned bar-restaurant has always maintained for 28 years. Entertainment on the first floor would be continued.

Keeping Cowley's as a one-story pub is an option if the two-story plan is deemed not feasible for the location. Whatever form the project takes, Greg Cowley said one objective is to pump up the lunch business, keeping customers from heading to other communities.

According to Cowley, who wanted to see what kind of reception such an ambitious project might receive from the planning commission, the brothers intend to assume ownership of the Grand River business from their parents (John and Marie Cowley) shortly after St. Patrick's Day.

John and Marie emigrated from Ireland in 1949, subsequently establishing Cowley's Old Village Inn in 1972. Their sons will maintain a hands-on style of ownership.

Continuing Irish theme

"We're looking at a Dublin Victorian 1940-style atmosphere," said Greg Cowley, noting that the brothers will soon meet in Atlanta with representatives from the Irish Pub Co., an Ireland-based architectural firm.

The Irish Pub Co. will look into designing both one-story and two-story versions of Cowley & Sons Irish Tavern.

"You can walk into any pub in Ireland or in Europe and they'll re-create that here in the United States," Greg Cowley said, adding that discussions have also taken place with a local firm, Wah Yee Architects.

The proposed expansion did pass muster with the planning commission, although serious questions remain about parking and whether the existing building could safely hold a second floor. Commission Chair Mardy Stirling asked the Cowleys to come back with a detailed operations report and various architectural drawings.

"My sense is we're happy Cowley's is here and we're happy you're taking these steps to improve your business," Stirling said to the Cowleys. "I'd love to see the Irish component maintained and continued."

Commissioner Terri Morency applauded the concept of bringing in "more of a restaurant approach. It's what we need."

"I welcome you taking the risk" of making changes, said Commissioner William Burke, who commented that a revamped Cowley's would be the latest in a string of upgrades to the retail-restaurant mix in downtown Farmington.

"I'm just tickled at the whole concept you're looking at," said Commissioner James Pogue. "But do you have any idea whether the building would (withstand being) two stories?"

Looking at logistics

Michael Cowley acknowledged that the structural foundation is limited. It is a 40-by-80-foot span with no basement. He said the results of a feasibility study hopefully will be received before March and should offer the co-owners a clearer picture. "We would add (cement) foundations where needed."

The logistics of such a project also need to be closely examined. Cowley's is bordered by Grand River to the south, a parking lot to the north, Books Abound to the east and the Korner Barbers to the west. It is thought that the bar-restaurant actually dates back to the 1940s.

Greg Cowley said he thought a second-floor addition was doable. "We think it can work. Nothing's been done (cosmetically) for 25 years."

Meanwhile, if all goes according to plan, construction would be completed over the summer months. But the Cowley brothers still need to move their project through a number of Farmington city boards and commissions, including the Downtown Development Authority, Zoning Board of Appeals and Historical Commission, among others. Cowley's Old Village Inn is located in Farmington's historic district.

Two obstacles the family faces include learning if the foundation is solid enough to bear the weight of a second floor and whether additional parking is available. Expanding the long-time "neighborhood bar" would only be feasible if the current lack of parking is dealt with, which both the Cowleys and city officials agreed upon.

Valet parking is one potential solution, said Greg Cowley, detailing an idea to funnel vehi-

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cles from a holding area behind the bar-restaurant to a municipal lot near the Farmington Training Center on Thomas Street.

After the meeting, the planned expansion drew a favorable response from audience members such as Mayor Bill Hartsock.

"It'd be a tremendous boost," Hartsock said. "People often refer to it as a potential goldmine. I think that would really be true."

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—Mayor

Support for plan

Stirling, who called Cowley's a downtown "landmark," echoed Hartsock's enthusiasm about the project.

"I think it will be a draw," she

said, adding that a new-look Cowley's will "bring new people to the downtown" while keeping customers in town who might now be traveling to dining destinations in other communities.

"So I think that's a positive."

Hartsock agreed with the Cowleys and planning commission that solving the parking dilemma is a crucial piece of the puzzle. "Whether they go to a second floor, they still have to do something about parking, something to transport these folks from point A to point B."

Providing a sense that the business community is willing to back such a project, local insurance company co-owner and DDA member Frank Clappison

publicly commented that he would allow Cowley's customers to park in his company's lot, on the south side of Grand River east of Farmington Road, during evenings and weekends.

"Lunch time would present a problem at our parking lot," Clappison said. "But evenings, we are not opposed to patrons of Cowley's using our parking lot. ... This would be an enhancement" to downtown Farmington.