

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
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ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL BOARD
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MEETING

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IN THE MATTER OF: :
 :
Whitfield Entertainment :
Group Studios, Inc., :
t/a Whitfield : Fact-Finding
Entertainment Group : Hearing
1301 W Street, N.E. :
Retailer CX - ANC 5C :
License #120468 :
 :
(New Class CX License :
Application) :
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Wednesday
March 30, 2022

The Alcoholic Beverage Control Board
met via WebEx videoconference, Chairperson
Donovan W. Anderson presiding.

PRESENT:

DONOVAN W. ANDERSON, Chairperson
BOBBY CATO, JR., Member
RAFI ALIYA CROCKETT, Member
EDWARD S. GRANDIS, Member
JENI HANSEN, Member
JAMES SHORT, JR., Member

ALSO PRESENT:

SARAH FASHBAUGH, DC ABRA Staff
VONISHA HODGE, Applicant
MARIA MURPHY, Applicant
SHAWN TOWNSEND, Applicant's Counsel

1 P-R-O-C-E-E-D-I-N-G-S

2 10:41 a.m.

3 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: The second case
4 in our calendar is a fact-finding hearing. It's
5 Whitfield Entertainment Group, License No.
6 120468.

7 Ms. Fashbaugh, good morning, can you
8 please elevate the rights of the parties in this
9 case, please?

10 MS. FASHBAUGH: Please stand by.

11 Maria Murphy, your rights have been
12 elevated. Vonisha Hodge, your rights have been
13 elevated. And Shawn Townsend, your rights have
14 been elevated.

15 That is all, Mr. Chair.

16 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Good morning,
17 thank you. Good morning, everyone, I would like
18 -- I would like the parties to please introduce
19 themselves for the record. It's my understanding
20 that Mr. Townsend has entered his appearance. So
21 can you please spell and state your name for the
22 record, starting with you, Mr. Townsend?

23 MR. TOWNSEND: Good morning, Chairman
24 and members of the Board. My name is Shawn
25 Townsend, S-H-A-W-N, T-O-W-N-S-E-N-D. And I'm

1 here on behalf of Whitfield Entertainment Group,
2 and I believe Maria Murphy and Vonisha are on as
3 well.

4 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: I saw -- I'll
5 have Ms. Murphy, can you please spell and state
6 your name for the record and your relationship to
7 this establishment, please.

8 MS. MURPHY: Hi, my name is Maria
9 Murphy, M-A-R-I-A, M-U-R-P-H-Y, and I am the
10 president of Whitfield Entertainment Group
11 Studios.

12 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Good morning,
13 Ms. Hodge, can you please spell and state your
14 name for the record and your relationship please.

15 MS. HODGE: Good morning, my name is
16 Vonisha Hodge, V-O-N-I-S-H-A, H-O-D-G-E, and I am
17 the CFO at Whitfield Entertainment Group.

18 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Good morning.
19 All right, good morning, everyone. This is a
20 fact-finding hearing on the Whitfield
21 Entertainment Group. And the sole purpose of
22 this fact-finding hearing is to establish whether
23 the Applicant qualifies as a multipurpose
24 facility under 25-113(g)(1).

25 The Board's practice has always been

1 to allow legitimate multipurpose facility
2 applicants to proceed forward to the public
3 comment phase.

4 To establish itself as a multipurpose
5 facility, the applicant needs to satisfy the
6 Board that it is, one, either a legitimate
7 theater, university, museum, conference center,
8 or gallery or other facility for the performance
9 of sports, cultural, or tourism-related
10 activities.

11 Or two, an indoor park, building, or
12 facility that primarily serves as a recreational
13 playground or a work base.

14 And just to inform again the parties,
15 this is a fact-finding hearing. The Board has
16 not made any determination. The Board is
17 gathering information. And so whatever
18 information the Board gathers today, we will make
19 a determination.

20 And the determination that the Board
21 will make is to state whether or not this is a
22 proper license class for this facility, or the
23 Board might inform the licensee that they should
24 apply for a different type of license class.

25 If the Board determines that this is

1 the proper license class for this facility, what
2 the Board -- the Board would then make it our
3 recommendation to the agency that the facility be
4 placarded. So that's basic -- those are
5 basically where the Board is today, we're just
6 gathering information.

7 Our fact-finding hearing parties are
8 not sworn. We're just gathering information.
9 The Board at a fact-finding hearing cannot
10 legally require an applicant to do any specific
11 action.

12 We can ask, if you so desire you can
13 say yes or no. But the Board cannot legally
14 require the applicant, or in this particular case
15 the applicant to take any specific action.

16 Now, does everyone understood where we
17 are today?

18 MS. HODGE: Yes.

19 MR. TOWNSEND: Yes.

20 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: All right, so
21 who will be speaking -- who will be speaking?
22 Are you, Mr. Townsend, or you, Ms. Murphy?

23 MS. MURPHY: I believe it'll be a
24 little bit of both, but you can start with me,
25 sir.

1 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: All right,
2 fine. Good morning, Ms. Murphy, welcome. And
3 you have applied for a CX license. So can you
4 please tell us what's your business plan?

5 MS. MURPHY: Sure. So we are a
6 startup entity. We've put together a business
7 during -- for the last two years during the
8 pandemic and we went, started operations
9 effective August of last year. And our business
10 plan is that we are going to be or that we are,
11 excuse me, a -- also called a full-service
12 entertainment company.

13 We offer film, music, special events.
14 And in our building, we touch upon all the areas
15 of which you mentioned, you know, for, applicable
16 for a CX license. Not only do we have special
17 events, but in addition to that, we have -- we
18 are in negotiations or have been in negotiations
19 for -- offer stage plays, concerts, corporate
20 events.

21 We are building recording studios that
22 will be on our second floor. And we will be
23 second recording studio in the DC proper.
24 There's only one other smaller studio in DC.

25 In addition to that, we're negotiating

1 with NBA 2K just to run their gaming league. So
2 I believe that we cover multifaceted areas.

3 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Now, I'm aware
4 that the ABC Board had approved some temporary
5 licenses for your establishment. And so just for
6 the record, what it is that you had submitted
7 temporary licenses that were approved by the ABC
8 Board. So what were -- can you explain to us
9 what were those events?

10 MS. MURPHY: Oh, sure.

11 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: What events
12 were those for?

13 MS. MURPHY: I don't know if everybody
14 watches Netflix, but there's a show on Netflix
15 called Bridgerton, and it's a Netflix and Shonda
16 Rhimes production. And what they've done is turn
17 the show called Bridgerton, and it's called the
18 Queen's Ball, into an immersive, live art
19 experience.

20 And that is currently at our studio.
21 It'll be in the studio through the end of -- end
22 of July. And then we'll segue into another
23 experience which I'll mention momentarily.

24 But the licenses are particularly for
25 Bridgerton, the Queen's Ball. It's a very

1 elegant experience. And where people wear --
2 Bridgerton takes places in the 1800s, and people
3 come in in gowns and 1800 type clothing, and with
4 the wigs that were worn at that time.

5 And so because it's the Queen's Ball,
6 they do need to be able to serve alcohol and that
7 type. So it's a whole take on an 1800s type live
8 experience. So it's dancing, there's acrobatics
9 like Cirque de Soleil type acrobatics, and things
10 like that.

11 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: This is the
12 type of event that you plan to have at your
13 facility?

14 MS. MURPHY: Yes, well, we're
15 currently having it now. Yes, sir.

16 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: No, I'm saying
17 what for -- is this a good -- I'm asking is this
18 an example of the type of event?

19 MS. MURPHY: Yes, yes, sir. So our
20 facility right now is -- we call it the black box
21 because you can create your experience or what
22 you need to have in the box. So this experience
23 will be through, for Bridgerton, through June.
24 And then -- excuse me, through July.

25 Then, after July, the black box is

1 going to be transformed into a -- it's called
2 Mexican Genius. If you're familiar with Frida
3 Kahlo and her art. And so it's sort of similar
4 to a Van Gogh Experience, but it will be the
5 Mexican Genius. That's what will -- the type of
6 event that we're moving into right after
7 Bridgerton for the next year.

8 And then in addition to that, you
9 know, it may remain another experience, or we
10 have offers in which we will be selling
11 production in there. Because the sound stage,
12 the black box, is fully soundproof and was
13 initially built for BET for film and production.

14 So we can change the experience of the
15 black box based upon the particular -- particular
16 need. So it can be special events, as well as it
17 can be used, you know, for us when we have
18 filming and production.

19 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Ms. Murphy, you
20 have mentioned the block -- the black box, and
21 what is a -- what's a black box?

22 MS. MURPHY: Well, at least our
23 particular black box is a sound stage. And it's
24 about 17,000 square feet, and it encompasses
25 everything that's needed for film and production.

1 And the reason why it's called a black box is
2 because it can be created into what you -- what
3 you particularly need.

4 For the sound stage, it could be built
5 -- if it -- it we're building it for a film in
6 production, it could be -- have hospital sets and
7 -- or bars, or you know, a house.

8 As well as it then can be transformed
9 into something else, you know, that's needed.
10 Backyard scenes, whatever is needed. It could be
11 transformed into what we're currently having now.
12 So it's generically in the industry, we refer to
13 it as a black box because literally because of
14 the sound stage, it's all black.

15 MR. TOWNSEND: And Mr. Chairman, if I
16 could just add, too?

17 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Go ahead, Mr.
18 Townsend.

19 MR. TOWNSEND: If I can just add
20 briefly that, for context, this is the former BET
21 campus where the BET campus was located. And so
22 this is -- you know, BET, as many of you may
23 know, historically have had a number of events
24 there in the past.

25 So Maria and her fianc,, who

1 unfortunately passed away from COVID in the
2 winter, they have a vision of creating not only
3 just the -- some of the experiences that took
4 place at the former BET experience or sound
5 stage.

6 But they are in talks -- they have
7 been in talks with a number of networks about
8 filming and producing shows there. They have had
9 a number of events there, ranging from concerts
10 to live performances to just anything involving
11 film.

12 And I'd be remiss if I did not add
13 that we've also been -- we are right next door to
14 the office of Cable Film Television
15 Entertainment, and we have been in close talks
16 with them. And they have also been referring us
17 to, you know, different companies and producers
18 who have been interested in filming in DC.

19 So not only is it, you know, the
20 entertainment, providing the entertainment piece.
21 But we're also providing an opportunity for DC
22 residents to learn new trades, be employed
23 locally here in the city. And so I think it's a
24 really good opportunity for us to revitalize that
25 space that's been dilapidated for quite some

1 time.

2 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Mr. Townsend,
3 I noticed you stated that there's been other
4 events there, but to the best of my knowledge and
5 recollection, we have only provided alcohol
6 license for the Bridgerton -- I'm sorry, for this
7 most current production. So were alcohols sold
8 at the other -- sold or served at the previous
9 events?

10 MR. TOWNSEND: So, good question. And
11 when we're talking about, you know, filming and
12 producing there, there has not been alcohol
13 served.

14 And on the occasions that alcohol was
15 served, Maria and the staff have contracted with
16 a caterer who has -- who is of course an ABRA-
17 certified caterer and able to serve the food and
18 the alcoholic beverages as an accessory to the
19 food.

20 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you.
21 Now, will you have any type of nightclub
22 practicing at this venue? Is this as a bar, live
23 entertainment, bottle service, VIP sections,
24 dance floor?

25 MS. MURPHY: We have had events that

1 have been concerts and dancing events. But that
2 is not -- I wouldn't call us that we are a
3 nightlife venue. We, as having a black box and
4 having special events, we do have those types of
5 events, but it's not our day to day.

6 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Now, are there
7 any other venues in the city that you would
8 consider yourselves -- your proposed venue is
9 similar to?

10 MS. MURPHY: I would say that we're
11 similar to Anthem, that's probably the most.
12 Because Anthem can be used for multipurpose type
13 of events as well. I would think that we're a
14 smaller type of a -- of a capital arena, you
15 know. Because there is obviously liquor,
16 basketball, and but they also have special events
17 as well and host concerts.

18 I would think that -- I did -- I would
19 think at some of the colleges and universities
20 where they have various events as well at their
21 facility.

22 And I was remiss with not mentioning
23 that we are in negotiations with Howard
24 University to help provide opportunities for
25 hands-on experience with their students in their

1 film program at the master's level. So.

2 MR. TOWNSEND: And I would just add
3 that the venue is currently operating as, I mean,
4 in comparison to Arena Stage or the Shakespeare
5 Theater, where, you know, we have a live
6 theatrical, you know, play for lack of better
7 words, taking place right now.

8 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you. I
9 don't have any other questions. Any questions by
10 any other Board member? Yes, Mr. Short, you want
11 to ask a question.

12 MEMBER SHORT: Thank you very much,
13 Mr. Chair. Good morning, Mr. Townsend, Ms.
14 Murphy, and Ms. Hodge.

15 MR. TOWNSEND: Good morning.

16 MS. MURPHY: Good morning.

17 MEMBER SHORT: Okay, this question is
18 to any or all of you, but I guess probably Mr.
19 Townsend would like to answer this, but any one
20 of you can. Just pretty much on the Board and
21 for the record, can you describe this building?
22 And describe the building and the community
23 surrounding it, please, very briefly.

24 MR. TOWNSEND: Maria?

25 MS. MURPHY: Want me? Sure. Our

1 building is about 57,000 square feet. It's two
2 floors. The sound stage in particular that we
3 are referencing as the black box is about 17,000
4 square feet. We have currently in the building
5 we've had -- well, some things are under
6 renovation.

7 You know, we've had the concerts or
8 special events. We've had Netflix and Master
9 Class in there producing shows, as well as now,
10 as you know, that we're having the Bridgerton
11 experience on the first floor.

12 On the second floor right now it is
13 empty, but we are currently in negotiations and
14 working with an architect to build out recording
15 studios. So we will have three recording studios
16 and about four podcast studios on the second
17 floor. And we'll be breaking ground on that very
18 shortly.

19 The surrounding area, sir, is
20 industrial. There's -- actually, we're right
21 next door to the city dump, as well as next door
22 we have a -- the car repair service. Across the
23 way there's a vendor that they produce food, so
24 we have food trucks coming in and out.

25 So it's all commercial around us. As

1 well as what Mr. Townsend mentioned, we are
2 neighbors to the Office of Cable and Television
3 and Film. As well as, I think, the Metro, the
4 Metro is there as well.

5 MEMBER SHORT: Okay, what are the
6 classification that DCRA or the Department of
7 Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, what
8 classification have they classified this building
9 as? What do -- or do you know that?

10 MS. MURPHY: John, do you?

11 MEMBER SHORT: The classification, the
12 building classification. Is it a --

13 MR. TOWNSEND: Mr. Short, it's zoned
14 as PDR-4.

15 MEMBER SHORT: Okay, thank you. What
16 is the total occupancy of the building?

17 MR. TOWNSEND: Nineteen-hundred, sir.

18 MEMBER SHORT: Okay, and you know I
19 was going to ask this question probably, Mr.
20 Townsend. The number of exits and egress from
21 the building?

22 MR. TOWNSEND: I will defer to Maria
23 on that. We probably should have had our
24 building engineer on.

25 MS. MURPHY: Sure, no, I can tell you.

1 I can count real fast. I know the building very
2 well, I've given a lot of tours. One, two,
3 three, four, five -- it's at least six.

4 MEMBER SHORT: Six exits and egress
5 for how many people?

6 MS. MURPHY: Nineteen-hundred, sir.

7 MEMBER SHORT: Couple hundred -- how
8 many?

9 MS. MURPHY: About 1900.

10 MEMBER SHORT: Nineteen-hundred.

11 Okay, also I guess what I'd like to ask is have
12 you reached out to any of the community, the ANC
13 or any of the other persons in the community, who
14 might have interests? Or do they have opinions
15 if you have reached out to them?

16 MR. TOWNSEND: Mr. Short, I have
17 reached out to Chairperson Jackie Manning of ANC
18 5C over the past few months and have had
19 conversations with her about our interests in
20 applying for an alcohol license.

21 She personally has expressed her
22 support, but obviously she cannot speak for the
23 rest of the commission. And I plan to continue
24 to have conversations with not only Chairperson
25 Manning, but the entire ANC after today's

1 hearing.

2 MEMBER SHORT: Okay, that sounds
3 great. You've done your homework, and I
4 certainly as a Board member appreciate that. I
5 know the Board, all the Board members do.

6 Again, so is there any build-out left
7 to be done or is there anything extra that's
8 going to be added or taken away from the building
9 as it is now, should this board decide to grant
10 CX license to you?

11 MS. MURPHY: The build-out that we
12 were talking is to the facade. It won't
13 necessarily interfere with or take away from what
14 we are currently offering and what's in our
15 business plan.

16 But there will be some structural
17 designs. Eventually down the road we have a plan
18 to, you know, make it look like, you know, more
19 attractive and make it more of a monument, I'll
20 say, of an area of a place of attraction for
21 folks in the DMV.

22 MEMBER SHORT: Okay. So other than
23 aesthetics, which you've just described, are
24 there any other building or construction that
25 needs to be done to make this a very wholesome

1 CX?

2 MS. MURPHY: We will, other than what
3 I've mentioned, you know, for building out the
4 recording studios, no. I mean, there is a full-
5 service kitchen, a prep kitchen that needs to be
6 put in. But it's just going to -- that's going
7 to be prep. And so we'll have warming stations,
8 there'll be no live cooking on the space. Other
9 than that --

10 MEMBER SHORT: Okay, I appreciate that
11 answer. And also I'm very happy to hear that the
12 ANC, ANC 5 is committed to working with you with
13 this.

14 Now, one last issue, and that would be
15 parking. How many people will be parking or
16 driving to your area, and how would that affect
17 or effect the community?

18 MS. MURPHY: Sure. Well, we're very
19 fortunate that we have about 484 parking spaces.

20 MEMBER SHORT: I'm very appreciative
21 of that information, and thank you so very much,
22 thank all three of you.

23 MR. TOWNSEND: Thank you.

24 MEMBER SHORT: That's all I have, Mr.
25 Chair.

1 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you, Mr.
2 Short. Any other questions by any other Board
3 members? I'll just ask the one -- I mean, there
4 are many different type of license class that a
5 license can be applied for. One you can apply
6 for a nightclub, you can apply for a tavern, you
7 can apply for a restaurant.

8 And so why is it that you believe that
9 this is the appropriate license class, that the
10 multipurpose license is -- why is it that you
11 specifically want this particular type of
12 license?

13 MR. TOWNSEND: Well, Mr. Chairman, I
14 think, you know, Maria laid out several events
15 that have happened in the past and some of the
16 things that we are interested in hosting at the
17 facility in the future. And the events directly
18 correlate with the definition of a CX.

19 We have theatrical, we have cultural
20 events for not only residents here in the city,
21 but folks who are visiting from out of town to
22 the city. We want this place to be another
23 attraction in addition to things that you may --
24 you may visit DC for. This is a place where,
25 excuse me, where we've had boxing matches and

1 fundraisers, etc.

2 So it's not just a place where we
3 want, you know, patrons to attend to consume
4 alcoholic beverages, but it's more than just a
5 tavern or a restaurant. And I think that, you
6 know, a multipurpose CX license is the only
7 option that we were interested in at the time.

8 As we thought through all of the
9 different types of events and amenities that we
10 wanted to offer to patrons, this is the reason
11 why we're here today. Because we think that, you
12 know, a CX license is the right license for this
13 facility.

14 Given you have other venues in the
15 city with this type of license that one would
16 argue, one meaning me, would argue that WEG is
17 offering more, a more multicultural, diverse
18 genre of events taking place at 1301 W Street,
19 NE.

20 So Maria, if you'd like to add
21 anything to that.

22 MS. MURPHY: Yeah, no I -- but Shawn,
23 thank you. That I think says it properly. And
24 you know, in addition, what we are doing, we want
25 to be a place to -- to be -- to be a service to

1 the community. There's so many talented youth
2 and young adults in the area that don't have a
3 place to go to film or to lay a track, you know,
4 at the recording studio.

5 Already we've given away many hours to
6 young directors who can't afford a place to a go
7 to shoot. And they come over here and they --
8 and we offer that to them. We have already had
9 someone who is in training for me.

10 Unfortunately because we're a start-
11 up, we don't have, you know, money which to pay
12 people or young interns. And they were able to
13 get a position with Bridgerton full-time.

14 So we're offering training
15 opportunities to people where they can, young
16 folks where they will not then be hindered from
17 getting the job because they actually have
18 experience.

19 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: All right, any
20 final comment you want to make before we bring --
21 or any final comments you want to make or any
22 additional questions any Board member wants to
23 make before --

24 MEMBER SHORT: Mr. Chair, one last
25 question.

1 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Yes, Mr. Short,
2 yes.

3 MEMBER SHORT: I would just like to
4 ask the panelists or coming before us today,
5 could or would they be willing to submit a floor
6 plan to the Board to help us better make our
7 decision?

8 MS. MURPHY: Of course.

9 MR. TOWNSEND: Yes, we can provide
10 that.

11 MEMBER SHORT: Okay, because we can't
12 -- we can't really ask you to do anything today,
13 other than -- or make a request of you today.
14 But if you would do that, I think it would help
15 some of us Board members come to a better
16 decision. Thank you.

17 That's all I have, Mr. Chair.

18 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: I thank you,
19 Mr. Short. Any final comments you want to make
20 before -- Mr. Townsend or Ms. Murphy, I know you
21 haven't spoken, Ms. Hodge. But anyone, any of
22 the three -- any comments that you want to make
23 before bringing this hearing to a close?

24 MR. TOWNSEND: That's it for me.

25 MS. MURPHY: No, I just want to thank

1 you for your consideration.

2 MS. HODGE: Yeah, just thank you.

3 CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Well, thank you
4 very much for your presentation this morning.

5 As I stated, the recommendation, what
6 the Board will now decide, is whether or not if
7 the Board determines that this is the proper
8 license class to apply for, we will turn it back
9 over to the agency for the agency to follow the
10 process. And the process would be that the
11 matter is placarded to inform the community.

12 If the Board believes that this is not
13 the proper type of license to apply for, then the
14 Board will -- the Board with the agency will make
15 recommendations to you to see what other type of
16 license would be -- would more -- would be more
17 appropriate for your business plan.

18 All right, so we'll take this matter
19 under advisement and we will inform you shortly
20 of our decision.

21 Thank you very much.

22 MR. TOWNSEND: Thank you, Mr.
23 Chairman, thank you, members of the Board.

24 MS. MURPHY: Thank you.

25 MS. HODGE: Thank you.

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CHAIRPERSON ANDERSON: Thank you, bye-
bye.

(Whereupon, the above-entitled matter
went off the record at 11:11 a.m.)

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In the matter of: Whitfield Entertainment Group

Before: DC ABRA

Date: 03-30-22

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