

# Main Street reacts to IFC FoodFirst Bill

Businesses are speaking out about the IFC's proposal to add a community kitchen and food pantry in Carrboro.

## Carrboro Commons By Kelley Hammill

Matt Neal is no stranger to the restaurant industry. His father, the late Bill Neal, built a legacy for himself in the culinary world. Bill opened La Residence in 1976 and later went on to take over Crook's Corner, a Carrboro favorite for Southern inspired cooking. Matt Neal continued his father's culinary legacy and opened Neal's Deli in 2008 with his wife Sheila. Since then, the couple has been working hard to provide the community with convenient and unique breakfast and lunch items. Neal's Deli is a favorite spot for many Carrboro residents and university students. Nestled in the heart of the business district, Neal is not only a friendly face to patrons but has also become a vocal member of the business community.

At a Board of Aldermen public hearing on March 23, over 40 members of the community were in attendance to voice their thoughts on the Inter-Faith Council's proposal to consolidate a food pantry and community kitchen in downtown Carrboro. Neal was one of only a few business owners to attend the meeting and discuss his concerns for the Inter-Faith Council's proposal. The Carrboro Commons sat down with Matt to hear more about what the business community had to say.

### How does your restaurant fit into the Carrboro community and culture?

Well, I think that a lot of our values and a lot of the values that people in the community have, are expressed by what we do. I live here, and I've been here a long time. I know this neighborhood pretty well, so I try to create something that would complement what we already have and serve the people here something they weren't already getting. And we're trying to support local



**Matt Neal of Neal's Deli supervises as his employees close up for the day. Staff photo by Kelley Hammill.**

businesses and local agriculture and be healthy but also real, hardy food. And then we try to be really neighborly. I'm here every day so I know people by name and by face. I try to accommodate not just customers, but our neighbors, and people of need around here.

**At the public hearing a lot of people talked about the essence of Carrboro. As a resident, how would you describe it?**

Well, it's a lovely little town, and it has a lively downtown, so I feel Carrboro is very fortunate. We have a strong middle class and low unemployment. We're lucky the economy here is pretty good. We're lucky that we're sort of a bedroom community for RTP and the university. I think there are a lot of people here who are invested in this community. There's involvement, there's awareness, there's an appreciation for one another. So I would say a lot of those things hold true in our community. Education is valued and fairness and inclusion is valued too.

**Would this description change if I asked you to describe Carrboro as a business owner?**

**"Everybody wants to support the IFC and continue to push to help them achieve their mission."  
--Matt Neal**

It's a diverse set of people in the sense that you never know if someone is going to be involved with the university, or is a tradesperson, or a freelancer, or a restaurant worker. Anybody that comes in the door of our business could be at any stage of life, and any demographic. You would never know from one person to the next what anybody does unless you talk to them, so I'd say there are a wide variety of experiences amongst our customers. It makes it a lot of fun for us because I talk to people who travel, I talk to people who fix things and make things and teach and write. So there's a lot of vicarious gratification for me and the staff. And people tend to be very well behaved and polite so that makes it fun to serve people.

**At the public hearing you expressed regret for signing a petition against the IFC proposal. What were your concerns when you first signed the letter, and have those concerns changed?**

My thoughts about this issue have not changed a lot. I didn't want to put in the letter certain things in absolute terms, and I would have left out a few details that are probably things we can only suppose may happen. I think what's important to remember is that there were about 60 people who signed this thing. We had to throw it together quickly in order to get it done before the first meeting at Town Hall. So it was rushed, and I think at the time we felt like we weren't being heard as a big, varied group of people who really invest in downtown and create the jobs and build up the market here. A lot of these people could probably

make a lot more money doing something else. These are a lot of people who are very hardworking and have the same values. They are the community.

We were in a rush. We wanted to make sure we got in on the process at that time, before it was too late. And it seemed like the Board of Alderman was in a bit of a hurry and had an overwhelming majority that wanted to go ahead and do things quickly. We wanted to say 'Hey let's slow down. Let's talk.' I want to work with the IFC, we all do. And I don't want anyone to assume that all we want to do is kick the IFC out of their own building and not let them do what they want to do here.

There are several layers of concerns that people have about this proposal. And one of them is that we'll have extra loiterers who may misbehave and who don't have certain life skills that are going to enable them to do much except be a burden on the neighbors. A lot of these people that have been at the meetings are people who take care of their tenants and their custom-

ers. They take care of their neighbors, and a lot of them are helping out people who may be hungry or homeless. They are quite charitable already. They typically aren't being a jerk to anyone because they're squatting on their back porch or littering in their yard. So there's a lot of not complaining that these folks around here have been doing. They've been putting up with stuff and they've been trying to be good neighbors, but if they have concerns they should be listened to and worked with and not vilified or boycotted.

### **What can you say to people who think that this is a black and white issue?**

It's not a black and white thing. It's a big, fat, gray thing, that's why it's not

so easy. Everybody wants to support the IFC and continue to push to help them achieve their mission. I think it would be great if they could find another location for the soup kitchen, because if they're going to put everything in one spot, I think that the traffic and the parking is going to be a challenge for the folks they're trying to serve. It's also going to increase the challenge on all their neighbors. I don't think it's going to be a win-win with their current design. Everyone wants it to be visible and downtown and accessible by bus. But at rush hour, which is

when they'll be serving dinner, it's not going to be very fun for people who are not necessarily homeless and unemployed, but who actually have time demands, to use this service. I think there are a lot of logistical things about providing this service that ought to be pushed on the organization. Sometimes people don't like to see someone pushing on certain issues, but I think the

majority of folks who have expressed concern about this issue are coming from a good place and want to see success for the IFC.

Another thing that I've been thinking about is that downtown, we've been sort of clustering into a really small area, that's supposed to be the business district, a lot of social services. One thing that I'm concerned about is if we have a cluster of these services that this becomes an area that people can avoid and then forget about. I mean it's pretty easy for someone to put something out of their mind or some part of town just because it's inconvenient. People will go to Southpoint and park 300 yards away from a store, but they won't go downtown and park 75 yards from a store.

That letter was an attempt to engage

and not an attempt to shut down. There were some diplomatic messages in that letter and then there was also some stuff that a lot of people took issue with as far as the specificity and the end statement. I don't want to see people shutting each other out and just sort of competing and thinking it's opposite aims because it's really not. I mean I know just about everyone around here who has a business and they're all incredibly good people of like-minded positive civic values. Don't shut the business community out and don't shut them out from the Board of Alderman. I think the rush to do good things sometimes doesn't always result in the best thing. There are a lot of non-profits around here, and there are a lot of non-profits that could be a lot better. I'm not saying the IFC could be better than it is, I'm just saying I want it to be the best that it can be and so does everyone else around here. The mission doesn't always justify the means. The missions doesn't always guarantee competency and we want to be demanding of the people we're going to support.

### **What do you think the Carrboro community should do moving forward?**

I think that it would behoove everyone to continue to keep an open mind toward positive outcomes. I think this is a step for them to be able to pursue a particular plan and as we all know, plans can change. I think the main thing is that we continue to be aware and talk to each other and be patient, but engaged. And I think the IFC could really benefit from all of this, because people are getting involved and becoming more aware. They're learning a lot about the IFC. And I think that if everyone moves forward and works with each other to a good outcome, then this little initial brouhaha turned into a community exercise in communication. I think that this community will be strengthened and enhanced by this. And if the IFC puts their FoodFirst project over there and it looks like it was proposed and it doesn't change that much, then I, and the rest of the people in this little neighborhood, are going to try to be good neighbors and help them do a great job.

### **What is the FoodFirst program?**

According to the IFC's website, the Inter-Faith Council's FoodFirst program encompasses the following:

- A Community Kitchen
- A Client Choice Food Pantry where members can self-shop
- An Information, network and referral program about community resources
- Leadership, decision-making and giving back opportunities
- Community gardens
- Food, nutrition and safety education programs
- Self-help groups for members to participate in together