

Nanaimo to get new gay bar

Will Level 2 fill the void left by 70 Below's closure?

GAY SPACE

Nathaniel Christopher

NANAIMO'S GAY community will have a new bar of its own in time for summer.

Former Odyssey co-owner Bill Belland, who owns the Modern Café in downtown Nanaimo, plans to convert the upper level of his property into a nightclub which will be called Level 2.

"It most definitely is geared towards the GLBT community of Nanaimo and all surrounding areas," writes Level 2 manager Mike McCune on the club's Facebook page. "It also is for all their friends and like-minded people. Bottom line this town needs a place for people of all sorts to feel safe and be able to come out and be themselves without fear of aggression or being treated a certain way upon entry."

An exact opening date has yet to be confirmed, but McCune states on the Level 2 Facebook page that it will open in late May or early June, pending the completion of renovations to the property.

According to documents related to Belland's liquor license application, Level 2 will have a separate entrance from the Modern Café at the rear of the lot. The approximately 2,500 square foot property will be of "contemporary" design, catering to the 19 to 40 age demographic with a maximum occupancy of 148.

His proposed hours are noon to 1:30 am, which would allow the bar to open earlier for special occasions. Regular bar hours will be from 8 pm to 1:30 am.

Belland's application for a liquor license was initially rejected by Nanaimo City Council in February 2008. Two weeks later, council reconsidered the proposal and

approved it with only two votes opposed.

Former city councillor Jeet Manhas, who is currently running for the BC Liberals in the provincial election, convinced council to reconsider the item after Belland gave him a tour of the property.

"After speaking with him and seeing the property firsthand I was satisfied with what he was proposing to do," says Manhas. "So he brought it back and made some adjustments to the plans."

Manhas was initially concerned about the safety of the stairs leading up the club.

"On the drawing board, the stairs appeared to go right from the bottom of the property to the top, but when I toured I saw there were some landings," he says. "It's a great facility and a great addition to the downtown."

Councillor Bill Bestwick, who voted against Belland's application, was concerned about the number of liquor establishments in the downtown core and their potentially adverse effect on nearby residential development.

"We certainly have experienced a considerable amount of disturbances in the downtown core with bars all closing around the same time, for the most part, all within a small area," he says.

"With the amount of residences that are being built within a stone's throw, there are more and more people coming to the streets at those hours. I don't know if that's complimentary to the residential component into the downtown."

Level 2 will be located on the same block as a large condo development called the Studio NA.

Malcolm Johnson of Coast Realty is a sales representative for Studio NA. He believes that Level 2 will be complimentary to development in the neighbourhood.

"From what I understand the club is going to be quite a nice club and attract really good people so I don't see why it would have an adverse effect," he says.

"I've been working in the downtown for many years and [Belland] is a big proponent of downtown and we're both working towards revitalization down here. He's got a nice restaurant and he's a businessman," Johnson adds.

Nanaimo has been without a gay space since February 2008 when the gay bar 70 Below was shut down after a dispute between the bar owners and the property company over noise and other complaints.

Vancouver Island Rainbow Association board member John Lee is optimistic about Level 2.

"If anybody knows how to run a gay bar [Belland] is going to know how to do it. I'm sure it's going to be quite successful," Lee says. He is already considering it as a space to host Nanaimo's annual Pride Brunch in late June.

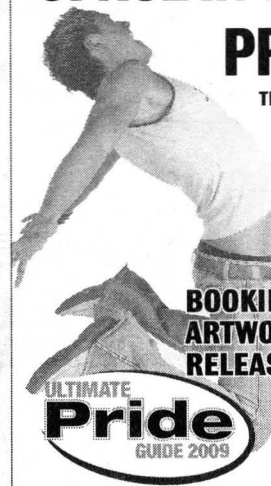
Bethany Scott, coordinator of Vancouver Island University's Out on Campus Club, hopes the bar will serve a larger community purpose akin to Harvey Milk's Castro Cameras which served as a centre for community activism.

"I think the bars get written off as a place to get drunk and dance your ass off. But you have space there during the day when it's not a bar; it could be used as a calmer space in the afternoon, a place for meetings, organize from. Why couldn't it be used as a queer headquarters from where we can take over the world?"

Scott believes there is a need for consistent queer space in Nanaimo and that a gay bar could fill this void.

Belland and McCune declined to comment prior to the bar's opening.

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