



**MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE
LICENSE COMMISSION OF THE CITY OF WORCESTER**

Thursday, October 17, 2024

Commissioners Present: Anthony Vigliotti, Chair
Charran Fisher, Commissioner (participated remotely)
Maritza Cruz, Commissioner

Commissioners Absent:

Staff Present: Sergeant Thomas Needham, Worcester Police Department
Officer Patrick Harrington
Alexandra Kalkounis, Law Department
Deborah Steele, Licensing

Call to Order – 10:00 AM.

Minutes: October 10, 2024

Upon a roll call vote the Commission voted 3-0 to approve the minutes of October 10, 2024.

Violation Hearing

**1. Lara Hookah Bar, Inc., 267 Lincoln Street
Violation of Rules #9, #14, #37**

Sergeant Needham presented the following.

SEPTEMBER 20, 2024

On September 20, 2024, members of the Worcester Fire, Code, and Alcohol Enforcement Units were conducting compliance checks at numerous businesses within the city. At approximately 11:21 p.m., Officer Patrick Harrington, along with other members from the various units, stopped at the Lara Hookah Bar located at 267 Lincoln Street to observe how the business was being conducted.

Upon entering the premises, Officer Harrington observed a group of patrons sitting at a booth consuming suspected alcohol and smoking hookah. They were initially accompanied by Ahmed Handahl, who had previously portrayed himself as the manager of the Lara Hookah Bar.

Officer Harrington observed a 750 ml bottle of alcohol on the table within reach of all the patrons. As he approached the table, he noticed Mr. Handahl get up and walk in his direction. While continuing to monitor the table with the suspected bottle service, Officer Harrington saw one of the patrons grab the bottle and hide it under the table, which he found highly unusual.

Officer Harrington was then greeted by Mr. Handahl, and he demanded that the patron turn over the bottle that was hidden under the table, which the patron complied with. Officer Harrington retrieved an open 750 ml bottle of Johnny Walker Blue Label Whiskey as evidence of the violation.

He explained the rules of bottle service.

A short time later, Officer Harrington asked Mr. Ahmed Handahl and Mr. Saif Handhal, the manager/owner of the premises, to step outside to speak without the loud music from inside. Both gentlemen became very defensive regarding Officer Harrington's observations of the incident. During the conversation, Officer Harrington advised them that he would be returning the following week to review the active surveillance cameras. He further requested that, as part of his investigation, they preserve all video related to the incident on the night in question. The entirety of the incident and interaction was captured by audio and video on Officer Harrington's activated body camera.

On September 22, 2024, Officer Harrington returned to the Lara Hookah Bar and spoke with Mr. Ahmed and Mr. Saif Handhal, who acknowledged that the patron had taken possession of the bottle and placed it under the table. At that time, Officer Harrington requested the video surveillance, and they agreed to meet the following day.

On September 23, 2024, Officer Harrington went to the premises at the agreed-upon time to retrieve the video but found the Lara Hookah Bar locked. He returned at 9:00 p.m., and the premises were still locked.

On September 24, 2024, Officer Harrington contacted Mr. Ahmed Handahl and Mr. Saif Handhal by text and phone call in an attempt to meet and obtain the video. Mr. Ahmed Handahl stated via text that he was going through a personal matter and could not meet. He sent four snippets of edited video from the night in question, even though Officer Harrington had requested footage from 10:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m., which could include the time leading up to the incident.

Officer Harrington again inquired with Mr. Ahmed Handhal about when he would receive the full video and received a text response: "All the staff at Lara Lounge don't allow me to show any video. We will go to a meeting. We don't demand the return of the drink I took. Thank you. No crime occurred in this place."

At this time, Officer Harrington contacted Mr. Saif Handhal, explained the situation, and requested the video. He was informed that Mr. Handhal was not going to produce it.

On September 25, 2024, Mr. Ahmed Handhal went to the Police Department asking to speak with Sergeant Needham and Officer Harrington, where he agreed to meet with them at the Lara Hookah Bar to download the video. They went to the premises at 5:33 p.m. and, after a few minutes, learned they were not willing to turn over the video and were denied entry to the premises.

Officer Harrington called Mr. Saif Handhal while on scene and requested to obtain the video. Mr. Saif Handhal replied, "I can't allow you to open my system." Officer Harrington requested the video again and was told no.

Several police body camera videos of the incidences described by the Worcester Police were viewed at the meeting.

Saif Handhal and Ahmed Handhal appeared to answer to the violation and waived their right to counsel.

Chair Vigliotti asked if a bottle was bought at the table. Mr. Ahmed Handhal stated that he served the table the bottle and one person at table was a friend and when he saw Officer Harrington come in put the bottle under the table.

Chair Vigliotti clarified that the person who took the bottle off the table was not an employee and Mr. Ahmed Handhal confirmed that.

Mr. Ahmed Handhal stated that Officer Harrington asked for bottle service license and Mr. Ahmed Handhal stated that he did have one and one of the servers brought the license which showed the bottle service and asked if could have the bottle back and admitted that the person at table made mistake taking the bottle off the table.

Chair Vigliotti asked when the bottle was on the table who was in charge of table. Mr. Ahmed Handhal stated himself and a wait staff person named Jamie, and he tried to provide the video surveillance of that to Officer Harrington, but he would not accept it. Officer Harrington stated that he would not accept as it was not full video and was edited and police wanted the full video surveillance.

Officer Harrington stated that the liquor license was not in the public area, and he asked Mr. Ahmed Handhal several times to see copy of the license so he could see if the license stated they had bottle service and if the video that was requested from the license holder was provided would show the police asking for the license.

Commissioner Cruz asked if the video was ever provided prior to Police getting warrant. Mr. Ahmed Handhal stated that he did provide several videos. Commissioner Cruz asked why they wouldn't provide police the video at the premises.

Commissioner Fisher stated that what happened was very serious and after reviewing the videos there needs to be a harsh punishment.

Officer Harrington stated that the license holder sent him edited videos and as investigators they want full video of the day in question and when they went to the premises were refused entry to obtain the full video.

Mr. Saif Handhal stated that he could not give them security camera as that would remove all their security from their premises and his place would not be safe.

Commissioner Cruz asked again why they would not let the police in to retrieve the video with police presence that way everyone would see the entire video.

Sergeant Neeham stated on September 26, 2024, Officer Harrington went to Lara Hookah Bar again and saw the hard drive recording images, audio, etc. of the business and he believed it to have video of the night in question. Chair Vigliotti asked if that video was provided to the police. Sergeant Needham stated no.

Chair Vigliotti reviewed the bottle service rule which shows it was a clear violation and the patron put the bottle underneath the table as they knew they should have not been touching it.

Upon a roll call vote the Commission voted 3-0 that the violation occurred.

Upon a roll call vote the Commission voted 3-0 to impose the 4-day suspension from prior meeting along with additional 30-day suspension with 10 days service and 10 days suspended. Suspension will be from November 8-21, 2024.

Adjournment

Upon a roll call vote the Commission voted 3-0 to adjourn the meeting at 11:39 a.m.