

TOWN GREEN | NEW HAVEN

Club's Request Puts Neighbors at Odds



GAME TIME Roberto Perez, a leader of the Caimito Social Club.

Thomas McDonald for The New York Times

By **Bob Tedeschi**

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NEW HAVEN

A DOMINOES club has opened its doors on the outskirts of Wooster Square, a development that raised few eyebrows in a neighborhood that has worked hard to shake off its past as a pocket of urban blight. But when the club members applied for a liquor license last month and a special parking permit that would make it easier to host tournaments, many residents feared that some of the neighborhood's progress would be reversed.

Members of the Caimito Social Club, which takes its name from the Puerto Rican hometown of one of its founders, said that most of the participants in the dominoes tournaments hosted here were older men who were only interested in a

little socializing and friendly competition. Adding some beer, liquor and a few cars to the mix, they said, would hardly imperil the neighborhood.

Wooster Square, once mainly an enclave of Italian immigrants, went into decline in the mid-1900s, to the point where historians described it as a slum. An urban renewal program in the 1960s largely rehabilitated it, and the area now houses Yale professors and other professionals, as well as students and retirees. In recent years, though, crime from the nearby neighborhoods has begun to encroach, and residents say they are leery of any business that, they believe, could attract a rowdy night life.

“It’s a fragile balance,” said Jeffrey Kerekes, a psychotherapist who helped lead the neighborhood’s effort to block the club from obtaining the city permits.

“There’s been some encouraging trends here, and we want to see that continue.”

The club’s establishment is part of a longer story that began three years ago, with the demise of a similar club several blocks away in this racially mixed area of the city. The Coamo Social Club, as it was known, housed a local dominoes team and served as a gathering place for many in the Spanish-speaking community here. Members gathered at the Coamo for nearly 15 years until the building was sold and the club lost its lease.

The club’s domino team, which competes throughout the Northeast, lived in exile for three years, until two former members, Carlos DeJesus and Roberto Perez, found a 7,000-square-foot haven in the basement of a Grand Street office building. The monthly rent was \$900.

Mr. DeJesus and Mr. Perez fixed up the space that would become Caimito with bathrooms and added a bar, pool table and a shallow stage for live music. Why such amenities for a club of 25 dominoes players? The Coamo Club, it turns out, paid the domino team’s travel expenses to faraway tournaments by hosting

tournaments of its own, as well as dances, weddings and other gatherings with as many as 400 attendees that bring in rental fees and revenue from the sale of liquor.

Caimito's members hoped to follow a similar fund-raising approach for its team, but after a visit from neighborhood representatives last month, the club's leaders understood that such gatherings might not sit well with the Yalies, retirees and others living nearby. The club promised to host no live music or events, aside from tournaments that might attract as many as 50 people to the facility.

To help recoup the costs of operating the club, Mr. Perez sought a nonprofit liquor license from the city, along with a permit to use the property's parking lot jointly with other tenants and a permit to operate a members-only social club. He expected little resistance when arguing his case to the Zoning Board of Appeals early last month.

He was wrong. Music would spill from the club, neighbors warned. Events would exacerbate traffic and parking problems. Members who took advantage of cheap alcohol at the club might gather near the entrance, contributing more noise.

Mr. Perez, who was joined at the meeting by Frank Alvarado, of New Haven's Spanish American Merchants Association, argued that none of these things were true.

"You can't hear anything when the doors are closed," Mr. Perez said, following the meeting. "And the doors are always closed."

Mr. Perez said he had gained permission from nearby businesses to use their lots in the evenings for parking, and club events would add little traffic to Grand Avenue because the events would happen during nonbusiness hours.

Targeting the neighbors' deepest concerns, Mr. Perez said the club does not extend membership to those with criminal histories, and members who are involved in alcohol-related incidents will lose club privileges. "Anyone causes any trouble, they're out," he said.

The Zoning Board gave no hint as to how it might decide, and board members did not respond to calls seeking comment. But later last month, the City Plan Commission recommended that the Zoning Board of Appeals deny Mr. Perez's application for joint parking permission, dimming his chances.

Mr. Perez said he planned to gather wider support for the public hearing, but Karyn Gilvarg, executive director of the City Plan Department, said a second public hearing would be "extremely unusual."

As the commission weighed its decision, the club continued to operate in the evenings on weekends and Thursdays, with Mr. Perez, 64, at the helm. A retired construction worker with 24 grandchildren and a gold rooster medallion hanging from a necklace, Mr. Perez is well known in Puerto Rico, he said, for raising and fighting champion roosters there.

A measure of celebrity seems to remain. Standing near the entrance of the club on a recent evening, Mr. Perez was greeted warmly by nearly every one of the roughly 20 men who came in from the street.

Nearby, Luis Santana, the genial captain of the dominoes club, taped the competition schedule onto the wall as Latin pop blared from the jukebox. Mr. DeJesus leaned a massive forearm on the bar and chatted with friends. In the back room, graying dominoes players studied the bones and tilted bottles of Corona.

Outside, the parking lot brimmed with double-parked cars. Through the alleys separating the lot from St. John Street's tree-lined walkways, Caimito's jukebox was inaudible. Residents rushed from their cars to their doorways, their breath visible, eyes down.

A block away, Wooster Square's walkways were empty. Gleaming white lamps stood in near-perfect alignment, like rows of dominoes waiting for a push that might never come.