

Phoenicia contract questions

Yesterday evening, Student Government hosted a meeting with UT administrative officials to clear up rumors and answer questions regarding student concern over the future of Phoenicia Cuisine.

Officials stated that the conversation with Phoenicia is ongoing and its contract is currently extended until June 30. However, no set deadline is in place as to when they plan to have a solution.

Kaye Patten Wallace, senior vice president of Student Affairs, along with Mario Toussaint from University Operations, Bonnie Murphy, associate vice president of Auxiliary Administration and a representative from Aramark who attended the event and spoke about the future of the restaurant and the relationship that Aramark has with the University of Toledo.

The main reason stated during the meeting for Phoenicia to potentially move from its current location is that the University would be able to expand its catering.

This would bring a rise to the amount of money that catering brings into the university, according to Murphy, but the exact estimated amount is uncertain. The money was stated to be crucial to the university because of increased financial needs of UT, according to Murphy in the last few years.

“Any options that are out there are being discussed,” said Murphy.

Concerns over the future of the restaurant began to reach students in March 2017 when owner of Phoenicia Cuisine Ed Barakat met with UT officials over the possibility of Aramark using the space the restaurant currently resides in for catering in Fall 2017, according to Barakat.

Barakat said that he had been meeting with UT administration regarding these issues since the beginning of the Fall 2016 semester, when they were informed by the auxiliary director that they would be losing their privileges to use Dining Dollars at Phoenicia.

Phoenicia is the only independent restaurant on campus other than Magic Wok, according to Murphy, though Magic Wok was able to work out a deal with Aramark that allowed them to continue to use Dining Dollars during the fall semester, unlike Phoenicia.

Murphy also stated that they used surveys to gauge student interest in the new restaurants coming to UT and that overwhelming students were interested in bringing a burger restaurant to campus, said Murphy.

Having met twice with administration in September 2016, Barakat said the restaurant received "partial compensation" for the loss of their ability to use Dining Dollars, as well as a renewed contract until June of this year.

However, Barakat also explained that while in these meetings with university officials he was informed of the possibility of Aramark using his space next year.

Barakat was told that the Office of Finance would work with him though and that there were other possibilities for the catering space, including Rocky's Attic. During the meeting, the possibility of using Horton's International House as a catering center was also brought up.

After these two meeting with officials in September, Barakat said that nothing else was brought up until when he met with officials again in March. After this meeting, and still with no clear answer as to the future of Phoenicia Cuisine, Barakat said that he then met with officials from Student Government and went to one of their steering committee according to Vice President of Student Government Cameron Forsythe.

"I didn't ask them to do anything on my behalf, but I told them this is what's going on is this something you guys are interested in, just telling that that this is what's going," said Barakat, adding that his main goal was to gauge student interest in the restaurant.

In response, Student Government began to work with Barakat to create awareness for the issue and organize a customer appreciation day. This event, which was hosted on Thursday and Friday of last week, was a huge success according to Alcy Barakat, the oldest daughter of Ed and a UT graduate in May 2015.

"Attendance-wise there was a lot of people there... they actually ran out of seats in the dining room," Forsythe said.

Additionally to the event, Student Government reached out to students to tweet at administrative officials regarding the future of Phoenicia. This prompted a quick response from President Sharon Gaber who tweeted: "UT has enjoyed a long relationship with Ed and Sam Barakat of Phoenicia. We have no plans for Phoenicia to leave UT or to end our relationship."

Phoenicia Cuisine has been in business on campus for 23 years, according to Barakat, whom, along with his two daughters and brother, are all University of Toledo alumni.

"We care about the atmosphere, we care about the university, we enjoy working here. We have been a dedicated Rocket family for a long time," Barakat said.