

Published: Apr 29, 2008 12:30 AM
Modified: Apr 29, 2008 02:42 AM

Coffee shop's customers locked out

Argument over Courtyard parking escalates; businesses hope to reopen soon

Feuds With Everyone

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CHAPEL HILL - Coffee aficionados jonesing for a cup of Ethiopian yirgacheffe at 3Cups coffee shop Monday found a locked door covered in conflicting letters about the shop's closure.

The ones taped to the inside said 3Cups hasn't been paying its rent.

The letter taped to the outside said the landlord had illegally locked the shop's employees and customers out.

A long-running dispute over a parking lot behind The Courtyard on West Franklin Street escalated over the weekend, when the property's owner had the locks changed on doors of 3Cups and its sister business, Sandwhich.

The Courtyard, a collection of small retail and office spaces, is owned by Spencer Young. Most of the parking lot behind it is owned by P.H. Craig. The two have been at loggerheads for years: Young won't pay Craig rent, and Craig won't sell Young the parking lot.

Craig has blocked off his section of the lot, reducing the spaces for Courtyard tenants and customers from 79 to 23. Craig said Monday that he plans to turn it into a private pay lot.

3Cups owner Lex Alexander said Sunday that he has been paying his rent into an escrow account for seven or eight months instead of sending checks to Young or a management company. Alexander argues Young is in violation of 3Cups' lease, which guarantees a certain amount of parking.

In an April 26 letter taped on the inside of 3Cups' glass door, Young wrote, "As of this writing, your balance due, including that of your sublessee (Sandwhich LLC) is \$85,802.48 ..."

In response, 3Cups taped a letter from its attorney above Young's. "In my opinion, the actions taken by Young in changing the locks to your leased premises under the circumstances presented here are unlawful," Joseph W. Marion wrote.

In another note, Alexander apologized to customers and promised to pursue legal options to get the doors open again.

"I think that being closed today is just another nail in the coffin of people thinking, 'How many more times am I going to come here and not be able to find a place to park?'" Alexander said Monday.

Alexander, the founder of the Wellspring grocery stores that later became part of Whole Foods, said the shop had canceled lucrative evening wine tastings because of the parking issue. "If



The property owner changed the locks at 3Cups and Sandwhich in Chapel Hill; letters taped to the glass door told differing accounts of the landlord-tenant dispute.

Staff Photo by Leslie Barbour

Lousy Landlord

[customers] buy a case of wine, and they're parked two blocks away, it just doesn't work," he said.

Efforts to reach Young at a number listed for his business were unsuccessful Sunday and Monday.

At lunchtime Monday, 3Cups baristas sat outside, apologizing to customers. Sandwich eatery owners Janet and Hich Elbetri were also talking to patrons but said they could not comment on the situation. In a post on the restaurant's Web site, they promised to reopen as soon as possible.

"Oh, my gosh, it's closed," exclaimed would-be customer Deborah Gerhardt. "What happened?"

"I'm so sorry," she said after hearing an explanation.

Gerhardt said she'd be back -- but would probably call first.

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