

Residents voice concerns over proposed development projects in town 10

LOS GATOS WEEKLY TIMES

www.community-newspapers.com

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Vol. 128, No. 29

Tuesday, July 19, 2011

CHECK OUT THE HOTELS IN LOS GATOS—THERE ARE SOME MAJOR CHANGES

Toll House Hotel is up for sale, Hotel Los Gatos under local control

By JUDY PETERSON

The Toll House Hotel is up for sale as part of a package of 11 hotels that its parent company, Larkspur Hotels, is reportedly selling off with an asking price estimated at \$250 million to \$270 million. Executives with Larkspur did not return phone calls to the Los Gatos Weekly-Times.

The Toll House has been a fixture in Los Gatos since it was built in 1983, but recently it has come under fire for violating its conditional-use permit that prohibits outdoor music performances. The CUP does allow indoor music performances.

Residents of the Broadway neighborhood, which is adjacent to the hotel, have complained to the town about concerts that have been taking place in the hotel's outdoor courtyard since 2007. Broadway resident Gail Randolph told the planning commission recently that she's been complaining to the hotel since then.

"Imagine my astonishment when a loud and obtrusive noise began invading my peaceful home," Randolph said.

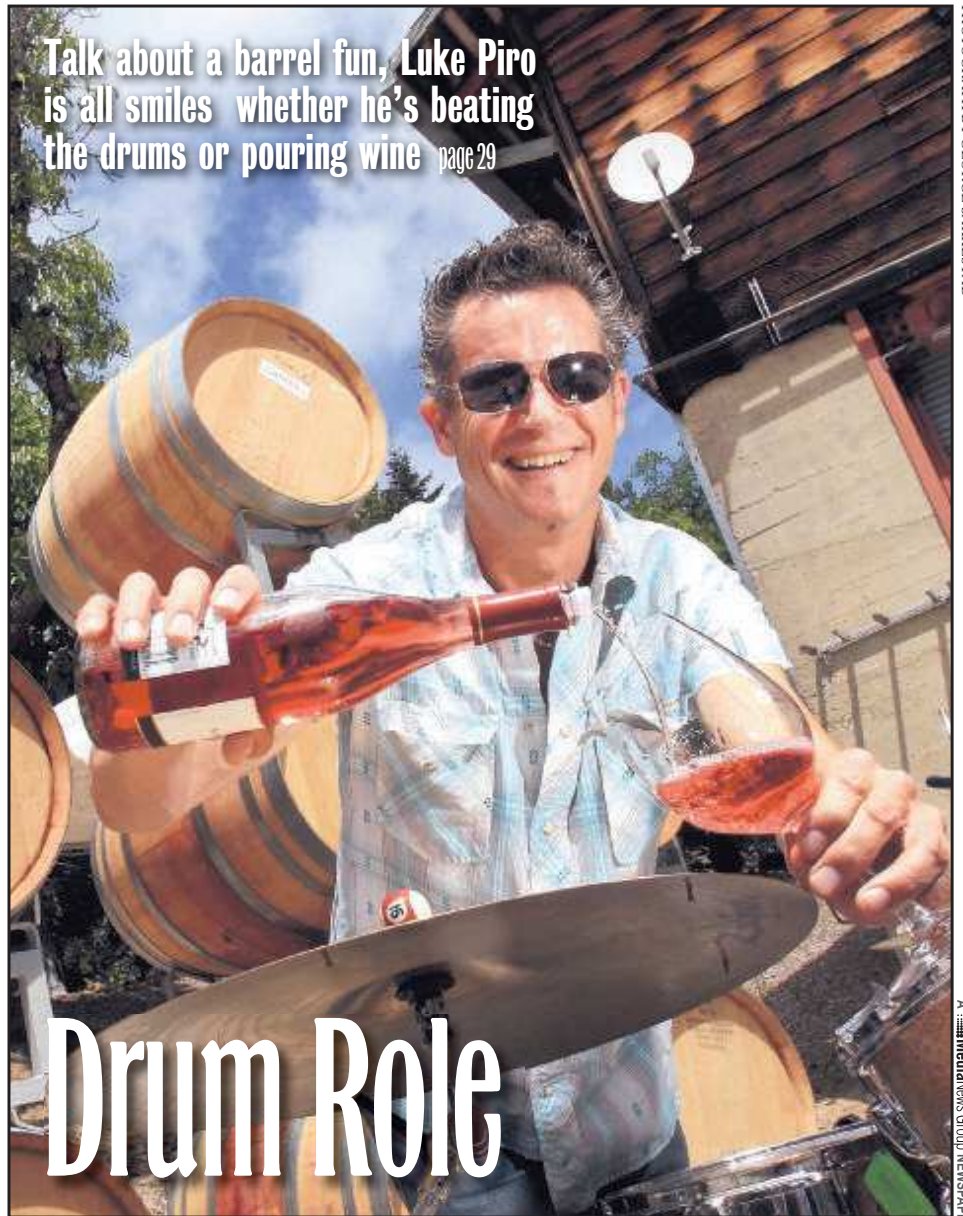
The town took up the issue in 2009, but allowed the concerts to continue until the controversy could be resolved. Planning Commissioner Thomas O'Donnell called the practice of letting an activity continue, even though it's in violation of a business' CUP, "kind of bizarre."

The hotel is asking for permission to stage 54 outdoor music events a year.

For now, the outdoor concerts have ceased, and the planning commission is set to revisit the issue no later than Sept. 14.

Hotels, page 8

Talk about a barrel fun, Luke Piro is all smiles whether he's beating the drums or pouring wine page 29




Drum Role

Luke Piro works at Savannah Channele Vineyards in Saratoga, in addition to playing drums for the South City Blues Band.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE SAKKESTAD


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BRIEFS

Shakespeare Festival returns to Oak Meadow

The Los Gatos Shakespeare Festival runs through Aug. 6 at Oak Meadow Park, with *Twelfth Night* and *The Tragedy of Macbeth* taking the stage, along with *Charley's Aunt*, a cross-dressing comedy.

Tickets are \$15 to \$20. Visit www.lgshakes.org for show times or to purchase tickets, or call 800.838.3006.

First female LG SWAT leader speaks on career

Los Gatos-Monte Sereno Police Capt. Alana Forrest will talk about her 28-year law enforcement career at an Aug. 3 luncheon sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and Comerica Bank.

Forrest made history by becoming the police department's first female SWAT commander and will share her insights on achieving success through relationship building, mentoring and community involvement.

The luncheon is from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at La Rincónada Country Club. Tickets are \$35 and can be purchased at www.losgatoschamber.com or 408.354.9300.

WVCS monthly meal fundraiser is a year old

West Valley Community Services, which provides services to prevent hunger and homelessness in Los Gatos, Monte Sereno, Cupertino, Saratoga and West San Jose, is celebrating the one-year anniversary of its Taste of Compassion program with dinners on July 23 and 24. The dinners will be hosted by Park Place Restaurant, 10030 De Anza Blvd. in Cupertino.

Reservations are available at 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. on both nights. Tickets are \$24 in advance and \$26 at the door. Visit www.tasteofcompassion.org or call 408.255.8033, ext. 152 for more information or to make reservations.

T AROUND TOWN



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VOLUME 128, NUMBER 29

LOS GATOS, CALIFORNIA

JULY 19, 2011

Piro can pour it on, with wine or on the drums

Drummer pours at Savannah Chanelle

By MARIANNE L. HAMILTON

Luke Piro's first drum kit was swathed in orange and black stripes and featured a picture of Tony the Tiger on the bass. The year was 1965, and Piro was 5 years old.

The 1978 Los Gatos High School graduate has been hitting the skins ever since. But these days, the script on his bass drum spells out South City Blues Band, purveyors of "jump blues."

For those unfamiliar with the genre, jump blues is an amalgam of big band, rhythm and blues, jazz and boogie-woogie. It became popular in the late 1930s/early 1940s, courtesy of such slick, shoutin' African-American artists as Bull Moose Jackson and Wynonie Harris. The format enjoyed a resurgence in the 1990s, when a younger generation "discovered" swing dancing.

Piro has been performing with South City Blues Band for two years, after a career that has taken him across the U.S. numerous times, and saw extended stops in Austin and Miami (where he once auditioned, unsuccessfully, for KC and the Sunshine Band). Proficient in pop, hard rock, country, blues and virtually every other genre imaginable, Piro says he's happiest keeping the jump blues beat alive.

"I always say our kind of stuff is good drinkin' and dancin' music. We do songs from the '30s, '40s and '50s, as well as our own stuff. And the funny thing is, when we're playing we see 8-year-old kids as well as 80-year-olds dancing. That's what's amazing about this type of music; it's timeless," Piro says.

Such audience diversity is clearly on display on a recent Friday evening, when Piro and his three bandmates performed at Tessora's Barra di Vino in The Pruneyard. After a scorching week, a half moon has climbed through mild evening skies to perch atop the trees that ring the



PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE SAKKSTAD

Music may be a passion for South City Blues Band drummer Luke Piro, but he also has an interest in and knowledge of wine. Piro pours a glass of wine for Lea Volfovsky while working the tasting room at Savannah Chanelle Vineyards in Saratoga.

shopping center. Piro tinkers with his kit on the patio outside the bar, testing cymbals and snare.

His black and white shirt is tucked into sharply pressed black slacks; a black and white herringbone-checked fedora tilts toward one eyebrow. Save for the soul patch that sprouts beneath his lower lip and disappears beneath his chin, he's clean-shaven. His short sleeves barely contain thickly veined biceps.

The rest of South City Blues amble out into the courtyard, similarly attired. Band leader and guitarist John Boutell's tuxedo shirt is open beneath his black vest, while sax player John Lull's fedora tops a long ponytail. Bassist Ray Figueroa

sports two-toned spats.

These guys are ready to wail.

And wait they do: In no time the patrons from El Burro next door are pressed against the wrought-iron fence that separates the two venues. Children wriggle in place, unable to hold still as the upbeat, catchy rhythms take hold. Random shopping center patrons stroll by and pause; all are soon smiling and head-bopping. A couple wanders out to the patio, showing off their best swing-dance moves. Seconds later, the remaining space is crammed with bodies and movement.

Surveying the scene, Piro grins and nods. "We're a fun band, and we love to have a good time," he says later. "And as far as playing, I ab-

solutely love the kind of stuff we do now because it's easier on the ears. I want to keep what hearing I still have, and am thankful to have."

This notion of gratitude is a frequent theme in Piro's conversation. Watching Tessora's owner Carol Pouya deftly weaving through the crowd, freshening drinks and bringing out appetizers, Piro says his current career—which, when he's not performing, sees him bartending at Tessora's on Tuesday evenings, and working the fields and pouring wine in the tasting room at Savannah Chanelle Vineyards on weekends—was purely a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

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AROUND TOWN

Piro

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"I started working at Savannah Channele in 2005," Piro explains. "I'd just moved back here from Austin, where I'd been playing for a few years, and out of the blue one of my brother's friends, who poured part-time at the winery, called me. He said, 'I know you need some work, and you know how to drive a forklift. We need some help at the winery.'

"I'd never heard of Savannah Channele, and I thought, 'What the hell is a harvest?'" Piro continues. "But the next day I was meeting with Tony Craig, the winemaker at Savannah Channele, and the day after that I was out there making wine."

At first Piro found the work grueling. He'd had been hired to assist with the harvest and subsequent crush, a process that begins in the heat of mid-August and lasts until bone-chilling rains pelt the vineyards in mid-November.

"I wasn't sure if I liked it at first," Piro admits. "It was hard! I was cooking in the blazing sun in August, and going home soaking wet in November. But in the end you're making a product that everyone loves. It's not like working in a warehouse shipping auto parts or working in a deli. I know; I've done both."

From Craig, formerly the winemaker at David Bruce, Piro learned the finer points of tending to the pinot noir, chardonnay, zinfandel, cabernet franc and other grapes that go into the boutique label's award-winning wines. "I do everything except the picking and mixing. Tony does all of the checking of acids, sugar content and that type of thing," Piro says.

With this expertise under his belt, Piro has become a popular fixture behind the plank in both the Savannah Channele tasting room and at Tessora's. He discusses vintage, soil, oak, fruit and nose with acumen of a trained oenologist, which by default he has become. Says Piro, "Working at the winery has really helped my knowledge in the tasting room."

That expertise hasn't hurt his musical career, either: Piro and the South City Blues Band



PHOTOGRAPH BY RACHEL KUMAR

Drummer Luke Piro performs with Amy Lou's Blues at the Redwood City Blues Jam at the Club Fox earlier this year.



Members of the South City Blues Band include, front from left, Ray Figueroa and Luke Piro, and back from left, John Lull and John Boutell.

have performed at Savannah Channele (where Piro's girlfriend, Liz Fischer, also plays piano), as well as Tessora's; such exposure has landed the band a steadily increasing stream of Bay Area gigs. As much as Piro adores making, pouring and sharing his passion for wine, he says his first love will always be settling in behind his drums.

"Sometimes I can't believe I'm still playing music at this

point in my life. But I've been doing it too long now to stop ... and the band I'm in really works; we get along great, and we play because we love that type of music," Piro says.

What Piro—who works out daily and has never indulged in drugs of any type—does not love are the trappings of rockedom. "I won't put up with alcohol problems, drug problems, tardiness or at-

titude. I've been around all of that too often. A band is like a marriage: You have to get along and hang together. There can't be any egos."

On a break from his duties in the Savannah Channele tasting room, Piro pauses to savor the beauty of the 58-acre hilltop winery and vineyards. Just beyond the patio, the sweeping valley views reveal the Pruneyard in the distance. Gesturing at the panorama, Piro says he feels fortunate to have made the connections he has with winery, wine bar and band. In the future, he dreams of backing "someone nice and polite, with a good following ... like Dwight Yoakam or Chris Isaak."

Until then, Piro appears more than content with his life. "I'm at a point now where I just want to have fun. And if it's not, then I won't do this anymore. I've been so lucky; it seems like everything has worked out, and I've had perfect timing."

Which, for a drummer, is a very helpful thing.

South City Blues Band will perform on July 23, 9 p.m., at Murphy's Law in Sunnyvale; July 24, 1 p.m., at the Wharf House in Capitola; July 28, 7 p.m., at the Coastside Gallery Wine Bar in Half Moon Bay; and July 29, 5 p.m., at Roux Louisiana Kitchen in Santana Row. More information can be found at www.southcityblues.com.

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