

LUNCH BOX TO CLOSE?

By ANDY OURIEL, Sandusky Register December 12, 2018

Register photo/ERIN CALDWELL



Because of a lease dispute between the property owners and building tenant, The Lunch Box in downtown Sandusky could close by Jan. 31.

The Lunch Box is located on the ground floor of the Cooke Block on Columbus Ave.

Read more about this building at <https://www.eriecountyohiohistory.com/cooke-block/>

SANDUSKY

When a waitress normally hands Harvey Heys his breakfast — a fried egg smothered in melty cheese sandwiched between two crispy, buttered halves of an English muffin — he’s normally delighted to dig in and enjoy.

Though, on Tuesday morning, he looked anything but pleased right before taking a bite.

Heys, along with his friend, Harry Boguszewski, bemoaned the imminent closure of their favorite dining establishment they visit almost every day: The Lunch Box on Columbus Avenue in downtown Sandusky. “It’s horrible,” Heys said.

A seemingly irreconcilable disagreement between The Lunch Box proprietor Cynthia Branco and the building’s owners, Rick and Meghan Hogrefe, resulted in both sides failing to renew an existing lease inside Marketplace at Cooke. Jan. 31 represents the restaurant’s tentative last day before shuttering at its present location. Branco continues to explore possible spaces to relocate her businesses but hasn’t selected one yet.

Sandusky officials straddled the line, shying away from taking a side and, instead, offered help on both ends as a mediator of sorts. “We want to work with The Lunch Box to help them find a great location to continue serving the citizens of Sandusky and beyond,” city manager Eric Wobser said. “We also welcome the investments made by the Hogrefes in a historic building that, if not revitalized, would soon be in need of demolition in the heart of downtown Sandusky.”

The Register independently learned about the conflicting issue earlier this week and spoke with both sides for a better understanding.

The Hogrefes - Under their joint company, H2 Property Holdings, the Hogrefes have invested about \$20 million across Sandusky and Bay View since 2016. From the \$20 million, they committed about \$8.5 million for renovating the Cooke Building, a storied structure almost falling into a blighted state due to years of neglect.

Tasks include:

- Repairing the facade to its late 1800s appearance
- Connecting the first floor stores into an arcade, of sorts, where people can easily access all the building’s businesses
- Restoring the third floor into a ballroom and theater for intimate performances and public events
- Improving egress to all floors while adding an elevator

Throughout 2018, they’ve contracted with various entrepreneurs — overseeing a German-themed restaurant; a boutique offering clothing, apparel, accessories and home decor; and a children’s museum — to begin operating from there in 2019.

They also reached out to existing tenants, such as The Lunch Box, to stay. But, for reasons unexplained, the Hogrefes couldn’t sign a new lease agreement with Branco. “We had given Cindy multiple offers to help keep her in her space through and after construction,” Meghan said. “She outright said ‘No,’ and she told us she had planned on taking space

elsewhere. We have tried every avenue to help her and be a partner with ideas, and she has rejected them all.”

The Lunch Box - Branco, who's owned The Lunch Box since 2007, expressed an overall disappointment with the situation. She bought the business from Debbie Bingham and Marie McHale, who debuted the establishment in 1987. While she's searching for a different spot, in hopes of reopening the restaurant elsewhere, it's no guarantee The Lunch Box will undergo a rebirth. “I'm trying to purchase a place right now,” Branco said. “I want to keep the business going, but I don't want to be in the building.”

Rick and Meghan, according to Branco, presented her with several different options, all of which “weren't feasible” for the business. “They said I could stay here during construction, but I can't because of the huge construction machines on one side of the wall and the customers on the other,” Branco said. “It will be noisy, and they'll be working during the daytime. I don't think a lot of people would like to sit there with the construction going on.”

A fluctuating construction timeline also frustrated Branco. “They first said it would be three months, but then they said 18 months, and I can't be closed for 18 months,” Branco said. And if she does stay, Branco said The Lunch Box requires a new kitchen, a \$200,000 investment, in its post-construction renovated space.

She's more concerned, however, about an uneasiness regarding her customers. They might never again enjoy The Lunch Box's specialties, such as chicken paprikas soup or Branco Burgers, all-beef patties topped with her family's home-grown peppers.

Branco also expressed sorrow toward her “loyal” staff, about a dozen workers today who now face unemployment. “I don't want to leave,” Branco said. “This is where I was going to retire. But I can't stay here with the options presented to me. It doesn't work.”