

Geoff Wells is getting ready to open his Freedom Boulevard tattoo parlor in Watsonville.

Shmuel Thaler/
Sentinel



After lengthy fight, Watsonville's first tattoo shop is set to open

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WATSONVILLE — Coming soon: Watsonville's first tattoo parlor.

After a lengthy struggle that included a city ordinance change and a civil rights lawsuit, Geoff Wells hopes to open

Freedom Tattoo and Piercing by Halloween. He has one hurdle to go. The city Planning Commission will consider Tuesday whether to issue a permit for the shop at 1910 Freedom Blvd. City planners are recommending approval.

"We fought the law and won," Wells said.

When he first approached city officials in 2006, Watsonville's decades-old ordinance governing tattooing required supervision by a licensed physician, a restriction that amounted to a ban. Recognizing the ordinance conflicted with state law

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and might be successfully challenged in court, officials moved to update the rules.

Though the idea of a tattoo shop never raised an outcry in the community, some city leaders were concerned it would increase crime, pose a danger to public health and damage the city's image. Others, including Police Chief Terry Medina, said the ordinance was sufficient to protect the community.

It took months and two tries to win City Council approval for the new ordinance, which restricts where tattoo artists can ply their trade and details permitting, training and sanitation requirements.

The City Council approved it on a 4-3 vote in September 2007.

Several months later, despite visiting every allowable parcel, Wells still had not found a place to rent.

In March, Kate Wells filed a lawsuit in federal court in San Jose on her son's behalf, arguing the ordinance violated her son's rights to free speech and equal protection under the U.S. Constitution. She said the ordinance, which puts some areas, such as downtown, off limits, and requires a specified distance between tattoo shops and schools, parks, liquor stores and each other, was too restrictive to enable someone to find space. The ordinance is discriminatory, she said, because it doesn't restrict similar businesses, such as art studios, where canvas instead of skin is the medium, and beauty salons, where permanent dyes are used to color hair.

Shortly after the lawsuit was filed, Geoff Wells said the Freedom Boulevard storefront became available. Wells is working on renovating the space, putting in new flooring and paint. He has two tattoo artists signed up as independent contractors and is seeking two more.

"Finally, people will have a safe, sterile place to get a piercing or tattoo in Watsonville. It will no longer have to be an underground practice," he said.

Kate Wells said the lawsuit is on hold pending the outcome of the city's permit review.

"He's wanted this for so long, it's hard not to be excited for him in spite of the fact that I still believe the law is wrong and unfairly separates tattooing out from similar activities," she said.

City planner Suzi Aratin said the shop meets all the requirements of the new ordinance. She doesn't think Wells' success will lead to a proliferation of tattoo shops in Watsonville since the zoning restrictions essentially limit how many can operate. But she said another person is looking for a space.

"I don't think this will be the first and only," Aratin said.