

Tougher liquor law plan sparks concerns

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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Proposed changes in license requirements too nebulous, downtown business owners tell Port aldermen

Port Washington barkeepers on Tuesday told the Common Council they are concerned about proposed changes in the laws governing the issuing and revocation of liquor licenses in Port Washington.

Although aldermen want to tighten the rules to prevent abuses, the proposed new ordinance is too nebulous and subject to interpretation to be effective, said Barney Bannon, who owns the building that formerly housed Foxy's tavern.

"If you pass that ordinance, you could shut everybody in town down in six months if you wanted to," Bannon said.

Even if that's not the city's intentions, he said, future councils could interpret the ordinance more stringently.

"I can take your word, but I can't predict the future," he said. "Why do it? You're creating uncertainty. I'd like to see some structure in there."

The impetus for the changes is the controversy over the denial of a liquor license for the former Foxy's tavern late last year, Grams said, noting that several aldermen said at the time they wanted to see the city's licensing regulations tightened.

Most of the proposed changes only affect applicants for new liquor licenses who, if the new ordinance is approved, must submit significantly more information to the city before their application can be approved.

For example, new liquor license applicants will be required to provide a detailed business plan to the city for approval and, in subsequent years, to obtain city approval for any substantive changes to that plan.

Sara Grover, executive director of Port Washington Main Street, said many of the concerns spring from requirements that new license holders have a security plan approved by the police department, particularly if security cameras are required.

Security systems are expensive, and add to the considerable cost of opening a new business, Grover said.

"I'm not looking to put anybody out of business," Police Chief Kevin Hingiss said, adding that a system with two cameras inside and two outside could cost \$1,500.

Police Chief Kevin Hingiss said he had surveyed the 34 liquor license holders in the city and 20 already have cameras in place, though he wasn't sure how many are compatible with his

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department's systems.

Cameras are important because they help deter thefts and provide police with a certain record of what happens in an incident, he added.

"It's not he said, she said anymore," Hingiss said.

But Maria Kiesow, co-owner of Pasta Shoppe, said cameras are not a panacea, noting that their presence at her restaurant has not always deterred theft.

Cathy Wilger, director of sales at Holiday Inn Harborview, said security cameras can also create a liability for companies. A number of years ago, the hotel's parent company was successfully sued for not constantly monitoring its cameras when an incident occurred, she said.

Kiesow asked if other downtown businesses would be required to install exterior cameras, which officials said could be used to identify people who break off trees and damage property.

She also questioned a requirement that new license holders submit a detailed business operation plan to the city, asking who will review these plans.

"I think the businesses need to have confidence in them," she said.

The city's Finance and License Committee and the Common Council would review the plans, City Administrator Mark Grams said.

Ald. Jim Vollmar, who stepped down from his seat to address the council, asked that the city consider a simplified version of the ordinance that he drew up and that places the final say on licenses with the Finance and License Committee rather than the council.

Grover said tavern owners and operators would like to meet with city officials before the proposed ordinance is acted on to clarify it and address their concerns.

"These are good businesses here," she said. "They bring people to Port Washington. They have some good ideas. They'd like to feel they're contributing."

Grams said officials are willing to do that before the council acts on the proposed measure Wednesday, Feb. 20.