

Wisconsin: Crime has dropped downtown - is the city's alcohol policy the reason?

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KRISTIN CZUBKOWSKI

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It's been three years since the Madison City Council passed an ordinance intended to gradually reduce the number of downtown bars and liquor stores and therefore crime, but while crime has indeed dropped, neither proponents nor opponents of the ordinance are able to definitely say why.

"Lots of time and effort by a lot of people has been devoted to this ordinance and yet we don't really see any data presented to show what effect it's had," says Mary Carbine, executive director of the Central Business Improvement District, a downtown business group that has strongly opposed the Alcohol License Density Ordinance (ALDO) since its creation.

The debate matters because the ordinance will sunset on March 5 if it isn't extended, though it's probable that it will be. The Alcohol License Review Committee will take up changes to the ordinance at its meeting on Wednesday, but discussion may continue at the February meeting if needed.

There isn't any debate about the drop in downtown crime. Police statistics show a 9-percent decrease between 2008 and 2009 in calls regarding alcohol-related crime, compared to a 6-percent drop in the overall crime index between 2006 and 2008. According to business district statistics, however, the number of bars, taverns and pubs has increased by one between February 2007 and September 2009, while the number of restaurants has increased by 11, which makes it unclear what effect the ordinance itself is having on crime.

Both supporters and opponents of the ordinance say annual reports the city is required to produce under the ordinance do not provide enough information to evaluate it well. Those reports include the number of liquor licenses applied for, the amount of alcohol-related crime

downtown, the correlation between license density and crime and the economic impact of the ordinance.

But opponents, particularly in the business community, say those numbers have been almost impossible to correlate with the ordinance itself given that the number of licenses does not reflect the capacity of alcohol-serving establishments. Nor is it possible to single out the density ordinance as a cause of a decline in crime, they say, given the police department's multiple efforts to reduce downtown crime.

Mark Woulf, the city's recently hired alcohol policy coordinator, agrees that there needs to be more precise data available. As the Alcohol License Review Committee begins to take up the discussion of the density ordinance at its meeting on Wednesday, Woulf says he'll push for making the requirements for the annual report more open-ended, as past policy coordinators have felt constrained in their ability to analyze the ordinance. The city is also working with someone from the University of Wisconsin to create a comprehensive list of license-holders' "legal capacity," defined by the Fire Department and "licensed capacity," granted by the committee.

"I think sometimes we get caught in the capacity of licenses without looking at the actual capacity of patrons," Woulf says. "This will allow us to dive deeper into effects of ALDO and look where most people are."

Still, not everyone is happy that the ordinance will likely still exist for city officials to analyze. Carbine of the Central Business Improvement District says her group has long said that the density ordinance would not improve downtown safety as much as other initiatives.

While the group still opposes the ordinance on principle, they have had some victories with a subcommittee of the alcohol license committee, which has recommended several business-friendly amendments to the ordinance. For one, the subcommittee recommended extending the time a property owner has to replace a bar with another primarily liquor-serving establishment from one year to two, acknowledging the length of time it often takes a property owner to find a new and responsible tenant. The committee's recommendations also include a specific exemption for entertainment-focused establishments, such as live music venues, to promote activities other than "vertical drinking," a committee catchphrase for people standing around drinking at a bar.

"We would rather be working with the city to think about how to encourage these (business) models," Carbine says, rather than working on the ordinance itself. "We think that's a slow but beneficial way to have a positive culture downtown."

On the other side, supporters of the ordinance say the recommended changes weaken the alcohol license density ordinance before it has had enough time to be effective. Emily Rohloff, spokeswoman for the Dane County Coalition to Reduce Alcohol Abuse, says the coalition would prefer to see the ordinance made permanent without some of the changes that broaden who can get a liquor license.

"We view ALDO as a very positive thing because it will limit the number of liquor licenses out there," she says, adding that when there are many license holders, the competition drives down the price of drinks, leading to overconsumption and crime.

"What we would like to see is for this ordinance to be made permanent, not having this sunset all the time where we re-discuss and renegotiate" its terms, Rohloff says.

She adds that the proposed change to a two-year license transfer rule, broadening the definition of entertainment and potentially allowing a higher percentage of alcohol sales at entertainment venues - from 25 percent to 50 or 65 percent - would "definitely" weaken the ordinance.

"There is research out there that points to a correlation between the number of alcohol outlets you have in a specific area and violence that surrounds it," she says. "The people who live (downtown) are tired about what goes on. It's sad, but a lot of them are afraid to go out on State Street at bar time."

As for the annual report, Rohloff says it has been difficult for many people to understand the effect of the ordinance over the past three years, but that doesn't mean the ordinance isn't working as part of a multi-pronged effort to reduce alcohol abuse downtown.

"That makes it difficult to just point there and say 'this is happening because of this one thing,'" she says. "It's not just that you pass one ordinance and then we can all sit back and celebrate because the issue is resolved."

Woulf says he does not think the changes recommended by the subcommittee weaken it "to the point it changes the intention of ALDO." The committee has started encouraging license applicants to provide more than just food and drink at their establishments, and the expanded entertainment definition codifies that.

"It doesn't make it easier to get a license - it actually brings more scrutiny" on people applying for entertainment exceptions, he says. "It helps us change our mix and look for new types of establishments past your regular bar or restaurant."