

Not everyone cheers vote to widen alcohol sales

Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - November 6, 2010

- Author/Byline: ROY APPLETON
- Edition: EDITION1
- Section: NEWS
- Page: A01

Innocent Onwuegbuchu can almost taste the opportunity. He's been thinking about where to put the walk-in cooler at his Seven Mart convenience store in north Oak Cliff.

"Business has been down," he said. "For us, the hope is alcohol."

Across the Trinity River, the outlook isn't quite as positive.

"It's going to hurt," said a not-smiling Lim Sao. Standing near the cash register at his Kwik Stop on Corinth Street, he talks reluctantly of the coming sale of beer and wine in Oak Cliff, where most of his customers live.

Nearby, at Frank's Beer and Wine, Frank Kwasnica weighed in as well: "It's probably going to shut us down."

On Wednesday, the Dallas City Council will certify the results of this week's election, one that saw voters overwhelmingly extend beer and wine sales to dry areas of the city and eliminate the club requirement for restaurants.

Then will come an expected flood of permit requests, with the first approvals perhaps by year end, said Loretta Green, Dallas region licensing supervisor for the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission.

"The amount we're going to get, it's going to take six to eight weeks" to process applications, she said.

The matter is also likely to be headed for court. Attorney Andy Siegel says he will file a lawsuit to overturn the election results.

Assuming the outcome stands, time will tell how much the changes matter, what impact they will have, particularly in the city's southern half - center of the opposition.

Residents there, led by Mayor Pro Tem Dwaine Caraway, have raised concerns that increasing the availability of alcohol will add fuel to the fire in already struggling neighborhoods.

"Our community is already under distress," Caraway said in a radio ad for the group Neighborhood for Safety, a political action committee financed by two liquor companies. "We do not need to add to the crack houses and drug houses and the blight that we already have, by piling on with more beer and wine stores. This is a community alert. This is an emergency."

Anna Hill, a South Dallas community leader, agrees.

"It's going to be the cause of more criminal activity in South Dallas," she said. "We already have problems with people walking and driving drunk through our neighborhood."

In the south part of the city, most of north Oak Cliff backed the effort to end the 54-year dry spell there.

Resident Gay Revi is among those looking forward to the convenience of neighborhood shopping.

"It's going to be so wonderful to be able to go to the grocery store and pick up a bottle of wine," she said. "It's so civilized."

Supporters also have touted the economic benefits of alcohol sales - from increased tax revenue to business creation and expansion.

Matt Spillers, owner of Eno's Pizza Tavern in the Bishop Arts District, says he is working out the final details for opening a brewery in Oak Cliff.

Brent Jackson says the prospects for beer and wine and elimination of the private club rules have aroused more interest in his proposed mixed-use development at Interstate 30, Sylvan and Fort Worth avenues in north Oak Cliff. "The project needed both propositions to pass," he said.

Kroger is among retailers preparing to file applications for beer and wine permits in now-dry areas. Gary Huddleston, a company official and leader of the alcohol campaign, has said the ability to sell beer and wine could lead to an upgrade of its aging store at the Wynnewood Village shopping center in Oak Cliff.

He said this week that it was "premature" to talk about plans for the store and added that expansion to new locations, including the city's southern half, was a possibility.

"Kroger is always open to new sites that make sense and will turn a profit," he said.

Jon Napper says the inability to sell alcohol has made it difficult to attract retail and restaurants to his Mountain Creek Business Park along Interstate 20 in southwest Dallas.

"We're really optimistic that now that it's wet we'll see some retail activity," he said. "We're real positive now that Dallas has finally come out of the 1930s."

It's questionable whether expanding the availability of alcohol increases its consumption. What's certain is outlets springing up in formerly dry areas of Dallas will cut into sales in wet spots such as Corinth Street near the Trinity and in neighboring cities such as DeSoto, Duncanville, Richardson and Addison.

Cockrell Hill officials were considering bankruptcy for the city before voters approved beer, wine and liquor sales in 2007. The decision attracted development, increased tax revenue and bolstered the budget in a city surrounded by dry Dallas.

"Before alcohol, Cockrell Hill was literally a ghost town," said Mayor Luis Carrera, who figures a change in fortune is on the way for his city of 4,600 or so people.

"It's not going to do us in," he said of the changing alcohol landscape, "but it will affect how we look at the coming years" of budgets and spending. Anticipating a decline in alcohol sales, the city reduced this year's budget by 20 percent.

With new outlets opening, Dallas would be ripe for a study of the relationship between alcohol sales and levels of social decay such as crime.

"We were concerned about the concealed handgun law causing a lot of shootings, and nothing came of that," said Deputy Police Chief Vernon Hale, commander of the southwest patrol division. And with an increased presence of alcohol, "I'll be more concerned about individual locations than overall."

Sales tax boost

The pro-wet Keep the Dollars in Dallas campaign paid for a study by economist Ray Perryman that projected a \$33.4 million annual sales tax boost from alcohol sales. A consultant hired by opponents disputed the estimate.

A city assessment placed the annual gain at \$11.3 million after a "very rough look" at the possible impact of larger grocers moving into now-dry areas, said Karl Zavitskovsky, the city's director of economic development.

Attracting full-service grocery stores to underserved areas of southern Dallas, as well as economic development there in general, has long been a city priority.

To what extent beer and wine sales help toward that end remains to be seen. But Zavitskovsky and others say any impact won't be swift.

"It's not like all of a sudden grocery stores are going to open" in newly wet southern Dallas, he said.

Economic future

Still, passage of the alcohol initiatives is positive news for the area's economic future, Zavitskovsky said. The opportunity to sell relatively high profit, shopper-attracting beverages "removes an impediment" for some locations," he said. "I see it as another potential building block, but it's not going to be a determining factor. It's another piece of the puzzle."

The larger goal is to build sustainable neighborhoods with a focus on public safety; decent, affordable housing; access to jobs; and amenities such as parks and trails, he said, adding grocery stores and retail will follow.

Timothy Bray, director of the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas, agrees that expanding beer and wine sales in southern Dallas won't be pivotal for development. "I don't think this is going to be the silver bullet."

A larger concern, he said, is the impact of alcohol sales on the area. Crime and other social ills are typically more prevalent around liquor stores than near outlets selling only beer and wine, he said. The propositions approved this week don't allow for opening liquor stores or bars.

"That's a common-sense argument," Bray said, when asked about concerns that adding any alcohol to the mix will bring more problems to distressed neighborhoods.

But simply making beer and wine easier to obtain may not make that much of a difference in a neighborhood, he said. "We don't know to what extent alcohol was already there."

Shawn Thomas buys into the argument that bringing in beer and wine will be bad for neighborhoods. A purchase in hand from Sam Tes' liquor store on Corinth, Thomas said he likes having to drive from his southeast Oak Cliff neighborhood for alcohol.

"It's good," he said. "You have to get out."

- Caption: PHOTO(S): (G.J. McCARTHY/Staff Photographer) "Business has been down. For us, the hope is alcohol," Innocent Onwuegbuchu says. He owns a Seven Mart in north Oak Cliff. MAP(S): (Staff graphic) Alcohol sales areas.

- Index terms: DALLAS

- Record: 16646815

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