

City Hall: Alcohol Kills, Isn't Anybody Listening?

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NEIGHBORHOOD POLITICS--In the four plus decades I have lived in Los Angeles, I've seen the huge impacts on our community -- both positive and negative -- of liquor stores, markets, and other retail alcohol establishments. We have many responsible and conscientious business owners that sell alcohol. But not all sellers are in that group.

Being able to manage how these businesses sell and serve alcohol is crucial, particularly considering the endless influx of more alcohol-related businesses into our crowded neighborhoods.

There are currently over 900 applications for new alcohol licenses in the City of Los Angeles. The challenge here is that the city and the state rarely if ever deny alcohol license applications. The state cannot provide any real monitoring of problems stemming from these establishments and the city has recently shut the door on public input concerning the acceptable practices of these licensees.

Most of us in LA have felt alcohol's impact in one way or another.

No one enjoys having to step over someone who is passed-out on the sidewalk while en route to their morning coffee or their children's afternoon theater performance. Nor do people like having their late night sleep ruined by loud music with folks screaming outside their window or seeing bunches of after-party red cups strewn throughout the neighborhood on a morning walk.

For years, committed community members, including LAPD and neighborhood councils, have worked with new business operators, sometimes for months, to reach mutually agreed upon operating standards for alcohol sales, known as "alcohol-specific conditions." This created a platform for dialogue between alcohol retailers and the community and a means of insuring a neighborhood's quality of life.

These conditions -- which for decades, through a public hearing process, were placed on alcohol permits to curtail problems such as late night nuisances and noise, loitering, or the sale of youth-attractive alcohol products -- are routine in cities throughout the state.

Unfortunately, the City of Los Angeles has recently taken the position that alcohol-specific conditions are no longer permissible, which ultimately silences community input into how alcohol is sold and served locally. In addition to refusing these standards for new businesses, alcohol-related conditions already in place for established businesses are deemed "unenforceable" -- the city is essentially stripping them out.

This is nothing short of outrageous and completely unacceptable. It flies in the face of our democratic process and our rights as residents, business owners, and property owners.

South Los Angeles residents have long protested the proliferation of liquor stores as well as the absence of healthful food and quality markets.

Downtown and Hollywood have some of the highest concentrations of bars, clubs, and other on-premise alcohol establishments along with the noise, nuisances, fighting, and crime that accompany it. The sale of single-serve containers to serial inebriates helps fuel the homelessness challenges in many parts of the city.

Westside communities suffer from high concentrations of crowded bars and restaurants that send noisy, drunk patrons out to litter, urinate, and worse in the yards of nearby residents.

Twelve of 15 Los Angeles City Council districts -- 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14 and 15 -- rank in the top tier for their incidence of three or more different alcohol-related harms -- violent crimes, vehicle crashes, deaths, emergency department visits, and hospitalizations, according to a recent County study.

And alcohol-related problems pose hardships across LA. In fact, each year alcohol-related problems take approximately 2,800 lives in the county, accounting for approximately 80,000 years of potential life lost, and costing the county an estimated \$10.3 billion a year. That's \$1,000 every year for every child and adult in the county!

LA is one of the only cities in California that prohibits local conditions and this is extremely disempowering for our communities.

These conditions are in many cases our only protection from alcohol-related problems since we absolutely cannot rely on the state to manage those problems for us.

To rectify the situation and restore our community voice in these important decisions, a "conditions motion" is circulating and gaining momentum across the city. The motion asks City Council to return to its former practice of allowing alcohol-specific conditions, and to cease stripping existing conditions.

Conditions are good for businesses. Allowing the community to come to a consensus with a new business operator around key practices helps speed the "path to yes." Getting critical community buy-in facilitates the successful establishment of new alcohol businesses. And when businesses negotiate conditions at the local level, they don't have to renegotiate at the state level, which saves them time and money, and ultimately encourages more growth and development.

Recently the South Los Angeles Alliance of Neighborhood Councils (SLAANC) voted in favor of this motion. It also has the support of the Zapata-King Neighborhood Council, along with 15 other neighborhood and area councils, including the Westside Regional Alliance of Councils (WRAC), and nearly 20 public health agencies including Children's Hospital of Los Angeles, and alcohol industry watchdog, Alcohol Justice. This motion is critical to ensure that our community's longstanding efforts to address alcohol problems are not dissolved.

The Valley Alliance of Neighborhood Councils and other alliances will soon have an opportunity to support this motion. This way we can get the city to again start honoring these standards.

I urge the VANC board and others to join with SLAANC and WRAC and all the other neighborhoods in standing up for our communities and businesses by supporting this motion.

We deserve to have our voices heard again.

(Jean Frost is a long time resident of West Adams and chair of the Policy Committee for NANDC, the West Adams neighborhood council organization.) Edited for CityWatch by Linda Abrams.