

Public or private?

Beach town backs effort to open clubs

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Published: Monday, March 17, 2003 at 12:30 a.m.

It's still a long-shot campaign, but supporters of opening private bars to the public got a boost recently from the town of Carolina Beach.

The resort town's council unanimously passed a resolution Tuesday asking state legislators to allow liquor-serving bars to admit people in the same way that beer joints do.

For a town where tourism is the only industry, the move makes sense, said Ray Rothrock, Carolina Beach's mayor.

State law says a place with a liquor license must either be a restaurant with 40 percent of its revenue from food – or a "private club," open only to members and their guests. To join a club, a person must submit an application and then wait 72 hours.

That's quite an obstacle to local bars when so many people come to Carolina Beach only for a short vacation, Mr. Rothrock said.

He has support from the town's bar owners.

"It's just a waste of money and time," said Dava Villapiano, owner of the Silver Dollar in the Boardwalk.

The vote is the most prominent result of a regional effort to change the rules, said Ric Kolenda, the executive director of the Cape Fear Hospitality Association. The city of Wilmington is also considering the matter, he said.

"I've yet to see a good policy reason for it," he said. "It's the most difficult law to enforce, and it's the one that makes the least impact as far as public safety."

Robert Lenthall would agree. Not only do the rules cost him business, but they also cause confusion, said Mr. Lenthall, one of the owners of the Liquid Room, a lounge and dance bar near the base of Market Street

When blacks, Marines or others are turned away for not being members, they sometimes assume it's out of discrimination, he said.

"It's the dumbest thing in the world," he said



Staff photo - Logan Wallace

Todd Hitt of Wilmington signs in as a guest at The Liquid Room in downtown Wilmington on Thursday night. Some Carolina Beach and Wilmington bar owners support a change to state liquor laws that require some clubs to be members-only establishments.

Some restaurateurs also dislike the rules – though they give them an advantage in attracting tourists

After investing \$2 million to build the Reel Cafe on Front Street, Dan D'Alessandro is proud to have created an asset downtown. But his food sales are close to the required 40 percent of his total, he said.

If he did convert to a private club, he could make more money, he said, but then he would probably half his staff. And instead of a bright restaurant open much of the day and night, there would be a club closed most of the time.

And most of all, he disagrees with the philosophy.

"If I want somebody to come in my restaurant and club, don't I have the right to invite them?" he said.

Though some clubs report the policy is a burden, many bars pay only lip service to the regulations. With less than one state agent per county policing the issue, the threat of a \$200 fine seems to be an acceptable price of business.

And that is another reason to take it off the books, Mr. Kolenda said.

"It discourages night clubs from being good citizens," he said.

Not everybody favors it. Wilmington Police Chief John Cease said he would worry that any change would mean his force would have to take over a job currently managed by the Alcohol Law Enforcement Division.

"I'm not willing to take on that burden unfunded," he said.

Sen. Patrick Ballantine, R-New Hanover, said he talked to several people, including bar owners, and got mixed messages.

And though he respects Carolina Beach's wishes, any changes will be difficult, Sen. Ballantine said. No matter what the local governments do, it would still be a Raleigh decision.

"Anytime you're dealing with liquor laws, you have some furious fights in the legislature," he said.

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