

Liquor laws spark heat at hearing

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Utah's restrictive liquor laws cost the state's restaurants and hospitality industry money and out-of-state business, industry representatives told members of the Department of Alcohol Beverage Control Commission Tuesday morning.

The laws have created "restaurant-free" neighborhoods in some communities. Worse, the laws contribute to great frustration and irritation for visitors to the Beehive State, those who serve liquor to tourists and residents told commissioners. "As Utah hurtles toward the 21st century and the hospitality industry grows, we just ask that we are allowed to keep up with the professional and customary services that our industry is based on," said Mike Watson of Stein Erickson Lodge in Deer Valley.

Watson was one of 13 people who spoke Tuesday to a packed, standing-room-only crowd at commission headquarters. Closed circuit TV sets had to be set up in the lobby to accommodate the overflow crowd of approximately 200.

But Jerry Fenn, former chairman of the alcohol commission who represented the LDS Church at the hearing, said the "silent majority" of Utahns is not represented by the comments of hospitality industry representatives.

"The rights and interests of these citizens cannot be forgotten in the debate over changes to Utah's alcohol laws," Fenn said, reading from a four-page statement.

The LDS Church teaches its members to abstain from alcohol. Historically, before legislators change state liquor law, they bring the changes before a special church committee for suggestions and consideration. The LDS Church, Fenn said, opposes liberalizing the laws "on moral grounds."

He said alcohol abuse is directly related to many negative societal factors, from traffic fatalities to birth defects to suicide and homelessness.

"As a major participant in building and supporting Utah communities, the church is concerned that moral-based laws to protect the public health, safety and welfare not be eroded in these communities. The church's support of such laws will not be deterred by those who nurture a culture of criticism," Fenn said.

"We hope policymakers in listening to those that are most vocal - industry and special interest groups who have specific agendas - don't forget that there are multitudes who don't speak out because the status quo is working and acceptable," Fenn added.

Not true, industry representatives said.

- Susan Kohen, club coordinator for Snowbird Resort, asked for a single type of resort and catering license. "We're making our guest jump through hoops," she said.

Resorts now have a mishmash of licenses needed to operate restaurants, bars, room service, special events and catering.

- Julie Wilson, chairwoman of the Utah Restaurant Association, said there is confusion and frustration among tourists who come to local businesses.

- David Jensen of the Salt Palace Convention Center, said single event permitting laws cost the Salt Palace money and business every year.

- Randy Barton, who hosts concerts in Park City, said private club licenses are "irritating and unwelcoming."

“Utah's liquor laws are not easy to understand and I would encourage members of the commission or state Legislature to staff a position where the person has to answer these tough questions” from tourists and others, he said.

- Betsy Bradley, a Rio Grande community council member and downtown property owner, said businesses in her neighborhood are “paralyzed” by the law that requires a 600-foot barrier between parks and businesses holding liquor licenses.

Although Salt Lake City has billed her neighborhood as a redevelopment area, the 10-acre Pioneer Park prevents development there, she said. Bradley listed five business owners who have invested financial and personal resources to redevelop the area, but have been stymied by that law.

Commissioner Vickie McCall called for the hearing this summer after Gov. Mike Leavitt appointed former lawmaker Ted Lewis to the commission, a move criticized by many in the liquor, restaurant and hospitality industries.

Of the five-member commission, four - including Lewis - are lawyers and members of the LDS Church. Only Ogden real estate agent McCall drinks socially, and people in the hospitality industry say the board is full of teetotalers who can't understand the implications of the rules it lays down.

Tuesday's meeting was supposed to allow those who believe they are underrepresented on the board to voice their concerns.

“I believe your views are because you have no experience in the hospitality industry, rather than that there is a lack of concern,” said Sarah Fugate of Winham Inc., a wine and spirits broker.

She said there needs to be more talks between the industry and commission, as occurred in the hearing Tuesday. There also needs to be an industry representative on the commission, something that has been talked about before.

Other restaurant and liquor industry speakers asked the commission to consider adding a beer and wine license. Currently, owners can get either a beer only license or a wine and liquor license.

Twenty-one people either spoke or provided comments. Commission Chairman Nicolas Hales kept a tight rein on the hearing and said two people, including Gastronomy Restaurants owner Tom Guinney and a Park City convention and visitors representative, couldn't speak because they hadn't properly asked for time.

Two people in addition to Fenn urged the commission to keep the laws the way they are, or make them even stricter.

George Van Komen, head of the Alcohol Policy Coalition, encouraged the commission to keep the state's stringent liquor laws the way they are. “They are working now. It is the unanimous opinion of the coalition that we shouldn't work to loosen but should work to strengthen them.”