



PUBLIC SAFETY

SDPD Hopes to Fight Crime by Fighting New Liquor Licenses

As it deals with an ongoing staffing crisis, the San Diego Police Department is hoping to curb crime by stopping new bars and other establishments that serve alcohol from opening. One Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control official said SDPD has been protesting all new liquor license applications throughout the city.



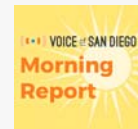
Jonah Valdez
September 11, 2017



The Gaslamp Quarter / Photo by Sam Hodgson

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Melissa Ryan, the supervising agent in charge at the San Diego office of the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, said she started to notice a change in SDPD's approach to liquor license applications in early July.

For years, the San Diego Police Department has been protesting new liquor licenses on a conditional basis – meaning it often drops its protest if the business agrees to certain provisions like reduced hours or no live entertainment. Outright protests, where no conditions are considered, were rare.

Ryan said she noticed SDPD had begun outright protesting all new liquor license applications that landed on her desk.

Though the caseload has since become mixed with some conditional protests, it was clear to Ryan that the department was tightening its stance. The Police Department says that's true.

“The San Diego Police Department is taking a conservative approach to their position with regards to supporting additional alcohol licenses in areas that are already oversaturated, and have significant high crime rates, and calls for police services are already significantly high demand.” said Sgt. Linda Griffin, who works in the department's vice permits and licensing unit.

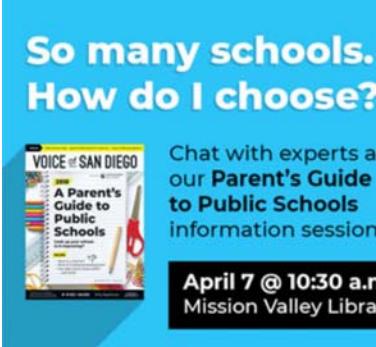
Griffin said in the past year, she has seen more applications come from places with high crime and high saturation of existing liquor licenses, such as North Park, Ocean Beach and the Gaslamp Quarter.

For Griffin and the Police Department, the theory is obvious: More businesses serving alcohol could mean more alcohol-related crimes such as DUIs, underage drinking, vandalism, fights and public urination.

“Anytime you have large groups of people that have been drinking alcohol, you've got the ingredients for people to make poor decisions,” said Scott Wahl, a spokesman for the department. People making poor decisions usually means more calls for service from the police. Another reason for the Police Department's tightened stance toward licensing is [its ongoing staffing shortage](#). Griffin said an increase in service calls to a stretched department could jeopardize public safety.

“There's no getting around it: We have a critical staffing crisis in the San Diego Police Department,” Griffin said. “And it would be irresponsible of us to support additional licenses where we've determined, on a case-by-case basis, that there is a high potential of calls for service, directly as a result of that license.”

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On Aug. 15, Griffin explained the department's stance on liquor licensing to economic leaders, lawyers, bankers and real estate executives at a Downtown San Diego Partnership meeting. Matt Friedrichs, a local attorney who works with businesses to secure liquor licenses, was at the meeting.

Friedrichs is familiar with the Police Department's conservative approach to licensing. One of his clients, Patron's Corner, a restaurant located along the edge of the Gaslamp District, was handed an outright protest from the Police Department in early July. Friedrichs said the ABC did not agree with the police recommendation and issued an interim operating permit, allowing Patron's Corner to operate until a judge decides the application's fate.

Friedrichs worries SDPD's conservative stance may limit the growth of downtown's restaurant industry. He said he recently advised one of his clients, a high-profile chef, to be wary of opening a restaurant downtown.

Pasquale Ioele, associate vice president of Flocke Avoyer, a commercial real estate agency who was also at the Aug. 15 meeting, shares Friedrichs' concerns. Ioele worries the liquor license issue may discourage potential tenants. Ioele said that many of the developing areas of downtown are zoned for businesses like retail stores, restaurants and bars.

"Everyone is listening to the San Diego Police Department, and we understand they are at capacity and staffing," Ioele said. "Hopefully there are some reasonable minds that come together pretty fast, and we don't lose out on tenants that want to open their business elsewhere."

The Gaslamp, home to dozens of bars, clubs and restaurants, saw 1,890 crimes committed and arrests in 2016, and the neighboring East Village saw more than 2,200 crimes and arrests, according to SDPD statistics. The department labels both neighborhoods as "High Crime Areas." Though total crimes committed in the Gaslamp increased by 3 percent between 2015 and 2016, the total in East Village saw a nearly 4 percent decrease over the same period.

Ioele thinks an infusion of [new businesses in places like East Village](#) could spur a drop in crime, not the increase SDPD is predicting.

"We like to think that active storefronts, as opposed to empty storefronts, will promote less crime, rather than the opposite," Ioele said.


Quartyard II, a pop-up community park that includes a coffee shop, a beer garden, food trucks and a music venue, is among the businesses starting to inhabit the growing East Village.



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During the hearing process for its conditional use permit, SDPD recommended against alcohol sales and live entertainment, citing high crime and an increase in demand as a result of the park. But the park also had 1,800 signatures from the neighborhood and 85 pages of comments in support on its side. Civic San Diego, the city nonprofit that oversees downtown development, issued the permit in August.

“We want to make sure that when people move downtown that they expect services — dining opportunities, entertainment opportunities — that they may not get elsewhere. At the same time we want to provide a peaceful and safe environment also,” said Brad Richter, associate vice president of planning at Civic San Diego. “It’s a balancing act.”

The balancing act is also something that other growing neighborhoods outside of downtown must deal with. And the act does not always tip in favor of businesses.

Little Miss Brewing was looking to open a tasting room in Ocean Beach this year. The Miramar-based company applied for a liquor license and was given a conditional protest from the police department in June. The Ocean Beach Planning Board was against the idea of the tasting room, advocating for a bookstore or an organic market instead.

One month later, ABC told Little Miss Brewing that the police were recommending giving out any new liquor licenses in the Ocean Beach area, once again pointing to crime and high saturation. An official decision from ABC is still pending.

Without a license, the owners are stuck paying roughly \$5,500 in rent with no business. The tasting room would have joined large craft beer establishments in Ocean Beach, such as Pizza Port, Mike Hess and Belching Beaver.

“Seven breweries came in before us and had no problems, I don’t get it,” said Greg Malkin, the operations manager of Little Miss Brewing. Malkin pointed out that crime is down in Ocean Beach.

“It’s not an issue of crime, it’s an issue of policy and politics. Restaurants and [craft beer] tasting rooms — if they cause crime — then crime would be crazy in San Diego, because San Diego is full of them,” Malkin said.

Ocean Beach saw a 16 percent decrease in overall crime from 2015 to 2016. But crime stats for the census tract that encompasses Newport Avenue, Ocean Beach’s main drag, where Little Miss Brewing’s tasting room is located, put it well over the police department’s “High Crime Area” label.

Griffin said that her unit has recently outright protested several license applications from Ocean Beach.

“There’s comes a point when the glass gets full,” she said.

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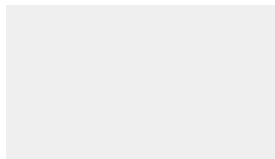


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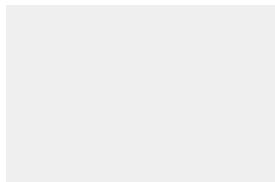
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Jonah Valdez is a freelance reporter based in San Diego, but is ready to travel wherever a story may lead. You can contact him via email at jonahmvaldez@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter [@jonahmy](#).

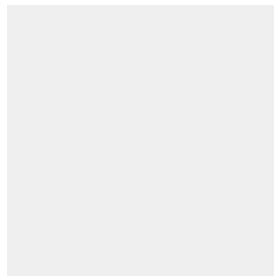
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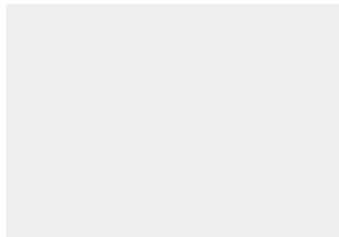


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