

Bars may convert to private clubs

Patrons would bring in their own alcohol

B.A. MORELLI • IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN • DECEMBER 18, 2010

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An Iowa City restaurant and bar owner said she expects some bars that are at risk of going out of business in the wake of the new 21-only bar entry law will convert to private clubs where alcohol is not served but patrons can bring their own.



Leah Cohen, the owner of Bo James, said she has spoken with six to eight people, including some bar owners, who have discussed the concept, and she expects at least two bars will give it a try. The concept is that the clubs could charge cover fees, they would be less regulated because they don't serve alcohol, and may be exempt from police checks, she said.

"There is a good likelihood we are going to see some of this," Cohen said. "There are five to 10 places that are very at risk for losing their business. Whenever you have that sort of thing you are going to have people who are going to get more imaginative."

The concept of bring your own alcohol establishments arose at a meeting Friday for the Partnership for Alcohol Safety meeting. The partnership is a combination of officials from University of Iowa, Iowa City and Johnson County governments, a range of local business people and other stakeholders.

Iowa City Mayor Matt Hayek, who is co-chairman of the partnership, said he has not seen any attempts at such a conversion yet and said he would need to confer with the city attorney about what is possible under city code.

"If further tightening of the ordinance is necessary, City Council will take a look at that," Hayek said.

Judy Seib, special projects coordinator for the Iowa Alcoholic Beverages Division who was on hand for the meeting, said bring your own alcohol setups have been used by strip clubs where alcohol is not allowed to be served and for bars that have lost their liquor license.

Patrons could bring beer and wine, but hard liquor would not be allowed, she said. Seib said after hours private clubs where patrons can bring their own alcohol are in Des Moines and Davenport.

Mark Ginsberg, owner of M.C. Ginsberg in downtown Iowa City, also said some people are looking for ways around the new 21-only law in Iowa City.

"We've built this mouse trap, but we've also created this bigger more creative mouse," said Mark Ginsberg, owner of M.C. Ginsberg in downtown Iowa City. "What some of these larger bars are talking about at this point is bring your own booze."

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Also at the meeting, Jim Clayton, a beverage division commissioner, said Iowa City needs to examine how to craft laws that allow successful prosecution of problem bars and denial of liquor licenses, which other communities have managed to do.

"We are behind the curve in Iowa City in terms of successful prosecution," said Clayton, who lives in Iowa City.

Stephen Larson, beverage division director, was on hand for the meeting and promised support from the division in the form of education and outreach in dealing with alcohol issues in Iowa City.

"We are going to be a partner," Larson said.

The partnership committee is planning a summit in January to explore the future mission and direction of the group.

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