

Oceanside Would Benefit from Comprehensive Standards for Alcohol Sales

By Craig Balben

As the craft beer industry continues to expand throughout San Diego county and the nation, cities are trying to court the industry as not to miss out on the action. We understand that positive opportunities can come from the expansion of the craft brewery industry coming to North County. Some opportunities include providing increased tax revenue, skilled jobs, and tourism. Oceanside's current zoning laws prohibit beer manufacturers from opening within the coastal zone if they're not part of a restaurant. These restrictions haven't prevented a growth in such businesses along Coast Highway.

City planning staff are now in the process of amending zoning codes to streamline approval to allow craft breweries and wineries without food sales in the coastal zone (and throughout the City). One highly contested amendment is to grant alcohol licenses to microbreweries and microwineries in these commercial zones without requiring a public hearing. Following a large amount of resident concern voiced at a public workshop held on February 24, the city is revising their plans and seeking additional public input.

Though most of the resident concerns focused on traffic, parking, and delivery trucks, residents should be equally concerned about increasing alcohol outlet density and its associated consequences.

The U.S. Department of Justice's *"Alcohol and Crime"* report notes a statistical correlation between establishments that sell alcohol and an increase in crime. Numerous studies confirm that neighborhoods with dense concentration of alcohol outlets experience higher rates of alcohol consumption, binge drinking, violence, and underage drinking.

One of the most effective approaches for reducing excessive drinking and its many health and social consequences is to limit the physical availability of alcohol. Local governments have the ability and authority to do so by creating responsible zoning standards that support local control and limit over concentration of businesses that sell alcohol. Alcohol remains the most abused drug by young people, and is associated with the leading causes of death for teens and young adults – motor vehicle crashes, homicides, and suicides.

Last May, Oceanside amended its zoning laws to prohibit restaurants with drive-through windows from selling alcohol, recognizing that alcohol sales at Taco Bell or other fast food restaurants on every corner could be problematic.

While there are definite differences between a Taco Bell and a craft brewery, having a clear licensing and oversight process for all alcohol retailers, as opposed to a green light for craft breweries and wineries with no local control, just makes sense.

This approach has been successful in many cities in California. The City of Ventura adopted such a process known as a “Deemed Approved” ordinance in 2005 to provide for the regulation of alcohol licenses and establishments.

Businesses pay an annual alcohol sales permit fee that ranges from \$250 to \$1400 per year depending on hours and volume of alcohol sales. This fee covers a dedicated law enforcement officer to serve as a liaison with alcohol retailers and ensure compliance with state and local laws, and helps prevent over-service, youth access, and drunk driving.

Given that local governments and residents bear the enormous costs of alcohol related problems, a fee that amounts to less than \$4/day is minimal.

Downtown Oceanside, much like downtown Vista, is going through a renaissance and is slowly becoming a destination for folks in North County – to live, work, and play. It is exciting to see the opportunities that new development will bring, such as additional restaurants, entertainment, and even new craft breweries. However, this growth should be balanced with effective standards and local control to protect public health and safety of all residents.

The City has developed an online survey to gather public input on the proposed zoning changes that can be found on the website (www.ci.oceanside.ca.us) on the main page under City News ‘Online Survey: Craft Breweries and Wineries.’ The survey will be open through April 15 and includes a question about Deemed Approved Ordinances, which the North Coastal Prevention Coalition strongly supports.

Few would argue against bringing more commerce into their city, but when that commerce includes alcohol sales, and the associated harms, there must be additional scrutiny and oversight to take the best course of action for community and public health and safety.

City of Oceanside should be commended for providing this opportunity to gather additional public input, and residents need to let their voices be heard and weigh in on this important issue that will have impacts on our neighborhoods and young people for generations to come.

Craig Balben is the president of the North Coastal Prevention Coalition.