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## Managing entertainment districts is challenging everywhere

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Memphis, Tenn., city leaders have found ways to manage bar traffic on Beale Street, while Charleston city leaders struggle to find the right solution for this historic city.

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Charleston can seem like a mix of disparate neighborhoods - historic homes, college-student rentals, and retail and entertainment businesses - coexisting uneasily at times.

To maintain a balance, city leaders proposed a midnight bar closing ordinance in the peninsula's historic entertainment district. Intended to put the brakes on new bars around the City Market, on King Street and parts of Meeting and East Bay streets, the plan instead brought withering criticism from the city's food and beverage industry as a business and tourism killer.

Charleston City Council, which gave the plan tentative approval, still is searching for a more palatable solution.

Charleston isn't alone in struggling to find the best ways to promote a lively downtown nightlife scene while maintaining public safety and encouraging a diverse commercial and residential mix. The approach a city takes seems to depend on whether it views its entertainment district as family-friendly or a party zone.

Charleston's ordinance attempts to walk the middle path by limiting the growth of bars in the heart of the city's historic and tourism district through an earlier closing time for new businesses. City leaders say it's needed for public safety and to promote mixed-use neighborhoods downtown, instead of nightlife strips.

"We are concerned that if there are additional bars open until 2 a.m., the capacity of parts of the peninsula to handle that and still maintain the special nature of Charleston will be difficult," said Charleston Mayor Joe Riley.

In some cities, nightlife districts have revitalized downtowns or been given free rein to become boisterous tourist draws.

Bourbon Street in New Orleans is, depending who you talk to, a great example of how a nightlife district can promote tourism and put a city on the map, or the poster child for bad things that happen when such districts are not tightly controlled.

New Orleans has few rules for nightlife on Bourbon Street, a stretch of bars, jazz clubs, restaurants and strip clubs in the city's historic French Quarter. It's a loud, crowded and often dirty stretch. Alcohol-fueled hijinks are commonplace. So is public nudity, despite it being illegal.

There is no required closing time for bars, and people can simply get a drink in a “go-cup” and then drink it as they go sightseeing or bar-hopping.

Bourbon Street is heavily patrolled and protected 24 hours a day by the New Orleans Police Department. The mayor’s Clean Team picks up the trash every day and street cleaners power-wash the streets every week.

Memphis, Tenn., goes to great lengths to corral problems on its iconic Beale Street.

The city puts boundaries around its nightly block party, which appears to many to be a free-for-all.

Every night, two blocks of the city’s famous thoroughfare light up and fill with revelers who can listen to music and drink until 5 a.m. inside about 30 bars and outside on the street.

And the city wholeheartedly supports it, said Paul Morris, president of the Downtown Memphis Commission, the group that is managing the city’s interest in Beale Street on an interim basis.

The city owns the property, and it leases space to club owners, who pay rent to the commission. “We’re basically playing the role of landlord for the entertainment district,” Morris said.

About 4 million people visit Beale Street each year, he said. It draws people to Memphis, or encourages them to stay an extra day, and it brings in sales tax revenue to the city. “I would say it’s essential for Memphis.”

The Commercial Appeal newspaper reported Beale Street businesses paid \$1.9 million in rent last year, and another \$3.2 million in state and local sales taxes.

But there inevitably are problems when that many people and that much alcohol come together in a small place. “We’re dealing with a huge crowd that we’re serving alcohol to until 5 a.m.,” Morris said.

Fights can break out and people have brought in weapons in the past. And what's left behind in the morning can be disgusting, he said.

But the area is well-managed, he said. The city has placed cameras along the street.

On Saturday nights and other busy times, it erects barricades at the entrances and limits the number of people who can come in. And it checks them for weapons with metal-detecting wands. Six or seven horse-mounted officers patrol the area.

Each morning a crew cleans up. "It's a daily challenge," he said.

Beale Street, in a formerly blighted part of downtown, is surrounded by a few mixed-use neighborhoods, he said. There isn't a lot of nearby housing, but there are a few apartment buildings within blocks of Beale Street, he said. "It would be difficult to live near Beale Street, unless you never slept," he said.

"A packed bar district isn't for every city," Morris said. "But it is for Memphis."

He's been to Charleston recently and he loved it. "I wouldn't change anything." Besides, he said, "you can't replicate Beale Street."

Mobile, Ala., also has attempted to corral its entertainment district. It decided last year to enhance its downtown nightlife scene by allowing patrons to drink in the streets in two separate districts along Dauphin Street, with a three-block gap in between.

The gap was meant to leave space for housing and other kinds of businesses. The Mobile Press-Register reports that people have difficulty understanding where the boundaries of the districts fall. And bar owners in the three-block exclusion zone have raised challenges, saying it's unfair that they have been kept out of the more lucrative district.

Riley said that if Charleston allows the concentration of bars in any part of the peninsula to grow too heavy, "you run the risk of creating what seems like a strip."

A strip, he said, is an area where there's little life during the day. In Charleston, none of the downtown streets are known exclusively for nightlife activity, he said, and he wants to keep it that way. "Market, Calhoun, Broad and King streets all are not strips," he said.

Portland, Ore., isn't known for bar strips. But it has an area known as the Old Town entertainment district.

Portland is taking what Riley has referred to as a more surgical approach to dealing with late-night activity.

City leaders there are mulling a proposal that would require all businesses that stay open past 10 p.m. to obtain a "late-night activity permit."

The Oregon Liquor Control Commission now issues citations to bars that break the rules, according to Willamette Week, but many bar owners simply consider them "the cost of doing business."

The proposed permit, and the threat of revoking it, would give the city leverage to compel change or shut down the business.

Chad Stover, a project manager in Mayor Charlie Hales' office, told the newspaper that "the over-arching reality is that Portland is becoming a city where there are more and more interactions between late-night establishments and their respective neighbors. We have to find a way to get along."

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