

JERRY COX: Drinking on Main
Alcohol won't revive communities

Thanks to the Arkansas Legislature, there's a new law that rolls out the welcome mat for entertainment districts anywhere there's a place that sells alcohol. Don't be fooled. It's not about entertainment; it's about public drinking and public drunkenness. If a city council approves it, you can walk up and down the street drinking alcohol just like the "cool folks" down in New Orleans or over on Beale Street.

Billed as another surefire way to improve our declining Main streets, Act 812 is Arkansas' latest attempt at drinking, gambling, and marijuana-ing our way to prosperity. Isn't that the way Sam Walton did it? Of course not!

But the folks in Bentonville do have it figured out. Thanks to the Waltons and other enterprising leaders, their downtown is booming without allowing public drinking. How could this happen? They have splash fountains for kids and great restaurants. They have new hotels, and you can get homemade ice cream from a street vendor. You can go for a walk or ride your bike around the square--enjoy the people, the sights, and the atmosphere. It's safe, clean, and fun. And it doesn't smell like a dumpster on a humid day after a rain.

I wish the sponsors of this law, Sen. Trent Garner and Rep. Sonia Barker, would have given it a lot more thought. It is too bad that they didn't consider the fact that these entertainment districts can go right along the sidewalk in front of a church or elementary school. Their law has no prohibition on distilled spirits, so imagine a group of guys walking down the street, passing a bottle of Jack Daniel's back and forth. Gov. Mike Huckabee understood the problems with public drinking when he vetoed an almost identical bill in 2005.

Pinning their hopes on the theory that thousands of people want to drink on the sidewalks in downtown Mountain Home, the city council has just voted to allow public drinking in its downtown neighborhoods. El Dorado, Texarkana, Pine Bluff, Little Rock, and other cities reportedly are weighing whether or not to do so as well.

Reports of successful entertainment districts are vastly overblown. In Kansas City, it's taxpayers who are footing the bill to keep their entertainment district afloat. In Phoenix, the Glendale Westgate Entertainment District struggled for years before going into foreclosure and being sold to the founder of GoDaddy. A year ago, Fairhope, Ala., rejected establishing an entertainment district out of concern that the town's family atmosphere would be lost.

Let's face it. Kids are not welcome in an entertainment district. Will families with children want to settle down for the long haul in a community where kids aren't welcome on Main Street or down at the courthouse square?

It's sad to see shops boarded up around the town square, but legalizing public drinking won't reopen those businesses. It will just let people drink beer on the sidewalks in front of those shuttered storefronts.

If communities are serious about revitalizing Main streets, they need to know there is no silver bullet that will get the job done--least of all public drinking.

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