

Support builds for 'Entertainment districts' in downtown Fort Smith, Chaffee Crossing

The Fort Smith Board of Directors pondered entertainment districts during the board study session Tuesday (July 9). The 2019 Arkansas General Assembly adopted Act 812, which makes it lawful for cities to designate "entertainment districts" where patrons can walk outside a bar or restaurant with an open container of alcohol for public consumption.

The act intends to "promote hospitality and tourism by establishing areas of a city or town that highlight restaurant, entertainment, and hospitality options," states a memo on the districts from Fort Smith Deputy City Administrator Jeff Dingman, which was included in the board's packet for the meeting.

State laws and city ordinances that "prohibit a person from possessing an alcoholic beverage outside of the establishment from which it was purchased do not apply within such entertainment districts," the memo states. The act specifically allows for the consumption of alcohol in public when it is consumed within the parameters of a designated entertainment district. Though the act allows for public consumption of alcohol outdoors in these districts, it does not "relax or supersede" laws or regulations dealing with alcohol including public intoxication or minor in possession of alcohol.

There can be both permanently designated and temporary districts in a city, Dingman said. Both districts have to be mapped by city ordinance, but temporary districts would only be activated during special instances. The entertainment districts, according to the act, should be in a "contiguous area" in a part of the city "zoned or customarily used for commercial purposes" where there are restaurants, taprooms, taverns, entertainment establishments, hospitality establishments, music venues, theaters, art galleries, art studios, tourist destinations, distilleries, dance clubs, cinemas, or concert halls.

Dingman said in Fort Smith two areas were under consideration for such a designated entertainment district — the downtown Fort Smith area that includes Garrison Avenue and Brunswick Place and the Historic Warehouse District at Chaffee Crossing.

Talicia Richardson, director of 64.6 Downtown, said a meeting was held in May to discuss an entertainment district with stakeholders providing valuable feedback.

"The idea of it would be to spur economic development. We need to be very strategic in how the district is [mapped]," she said, noting that while such a district would obviously benefit restaurants and bars, retail shops could also capitalize on such a designation by establishing

events like wine and art walks.

([HTTPS://TALKBUSINESS.NET/](https://talkbusiness.net/))



"We could also incorporate sidewalk cafés. Gus's [Bar and Grill on Garrison Avenue] has those great big glass [garage] doors that can be opened up. It would be nice to enhance that with a nice bar that juts out onto the sidewalk creating a sidewalk café," she said.

Lorie Robertson, director of marketing for the Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority, said the FCRA would want to explore the idea of an entertainment district in the historic district from Taylor Avenue to Darby Avenue to Terry Street.

The board agreed that the city needed to move forward to develop the idea of entertainment districts in Fort Smith, looking at physical boundaries as well as regulations, such as hours it would be deemed such a district. Director Kevin Settle (at large, position 6) suggested looking at other Arkansas cities already developing such districts, including El Dorado, Fayetteville and Mountain Home.

"This fits right into our plan for developing a downtown entertainment district that we have already decided we want to develop. I think Chaffee is a great idea too," Settle said.

0 comments

Fort Smith is changing. Don't miss the next big development.

Sign up for our free daily headlines and get local news automatically.

Keep me in the loop