

# Texarkana among cities pushing to create entertainment districts

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LITTLE ROCK—A number of Arkansas cities including Texarkana—as well as El Dorado, Little Rock and Pine Bluff—are either considering or are taking steps toward creating "entertainment districts" that would allow the open carry of alcohol.

## Document: Entertainment district boundaries



Arkansas Business reports the cities are seeking to take advantage of a new law, Act 812, which allows cities to establish either temporary or permanent districts in which patrons of bars and restaurants serving liquor could possess alcoholic beverages outside of those businesses.

This map shows the boundaries of a proposed entertainment district, where outdoor drinking would be allowed, in downtown Texarkana, Ark.



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The bill that became Act 812—"an act to promote hospitality and tourism"—was sponsored during the last legislative session by state Sen. Trent Garner, R-El Dorado, and state Rep. Sonia Barker, R-Smackover.

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Tourism officials in El Dorado, Pine Bluff and other areas wanted "to offer additional entertainment options," Garner said. "They thought this would be a good way to do that, to expand those entertainment options in a controlled, regulated fashion that ultimately comes back to local control."

The bill was opposed by the Family Council of Little Rock, a conservative, Christian nonprofit, and it passed by the narrowest of margins in the state House of Representatives: 51 for, 19 against and 20 not voting.

"Public drinking in entertainment districts raises serious concerns about public safety," said Jerry Cox, president of the Family Council, in a post on the group's website. "Cities like Memphis and New Orleans have had significant problems with violence in their entertainment districts."

Garner said the Power & Light District, the entertainment district in downtown Kansas City, Mo., was one model that was discussed, "a family-friendly place that, at a certain time of night, they'll shut it off and allow alcoholic beverages in a very controlled, regulated place."

"The most outrageous claim is that this is a public intoxication law and that's just factually incorrect," Garner said. All the laws about public intoxication and the use of alcohol still apply, he said. "Just because you're in these districts you can't all of a sudden break the law or act outside the norm."

Shortly after the bill's passage in April, Texarkana City Manager Kenny Haskin started the process of creating a downtown entertainment district by bringing the matter before the city's Planning Commission.

"Nationwide, entertainment districts have been found to rejuvenate cities, spur economic growth, generate tax revenues, and bolster cities' live-work-play images to potential businesses and residents. Proponents have said the districts become central gathering places, give their cities a heartbeat, become major drivers of economic development, and provide much needed jobs," Haskin said at the time.

More recently Haskin told the Associated Press, "We're aggressively moving forward" on an entertainment district proposal, and he expects to bring it before the Texarkana Board of Directors within the next six weeks.

"Breathing life into downtown, that is critical for us," Haskin said.

Pam Griffin, president and COO of the Murphy Arts District in El Dorado, said she had been working with Beth Brumley, executive director of Main Street El Dorado, on a proposal to take before Mayor Veronica Smith-Creer and the City Council. Griffin and Brumley have been talking to representatives of downtown businesses and other organizations about creation of an entertainment district. "We're still discussing the temporary versus permanent district and what makes the most sense for us," Griffin said.

An entertainment district in El Dorado would comprise the "downtown core, which, in essence is our nine-block area around our courthouse, plus the Murphy Arts District area," Griffin said.

"For our El Dorado, we have multiple organizations that have been focusing diligently on creating a 'festival city of the South,' and for our festival city patron experience and our tourism attractiveness, I think it's important to be as customer-friendly as possible," she said.

Go Forward Pine Bluff, a community revitalization effort, worked with Garner on the bill, and plans to take an entertainment district proposal to the City Council soon, said Go Forward CEO Ryan Watley.

The district's boundaries haven't been established, but Watley said it would likely include Pine Bluff's downtown historic district. "You want to have a walkable downtown," he said, and visitors want to be free

to carry their drinks from one place to another. "It's all about tourism and attracting people to the downtown area," Watley said.

Gretchen Hall, president and CEO of the Little Rock Convention & Visitors Bureau, said she's been in conversations with bar and restaurant owners about an entertainment district, as well as with Gabe Holmstrom of the Downtown Little Rock Partnership. She has also talked with the Little Rock Police Department "about the law and some parameters that they would like, from an enforcement standpoint and safety concerns."

Little Rock might start with an area within the River Market District, Hall said, "and then see how it goes.

"I don't think any of us envision that this is going to create major street parties on a regular basis," Hall said.