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To Enliven Downtowns, Some Cities Promote Public Drinking

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Public drinking can spice up a city’s nightlife — but allowing it also carries risks.



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A sign marks the area where public drinking is legal in downtown Canton, Ohio.

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By [Tim Henderson](#)

CANTON, Ohio — This shrinking factory town, seeking a hipper image to attract young people, tried a new tack this year: legalizing outdoor drinking.

Taking a page from warmer spots known for street parties, such as New Orleans and Memphis, the town best known as the home of the Pro Football Hall of Fame marked off 42 blocks of its downtown as an “[outdoor refreshment area](#).” In that zone it is now legal to carry a drink into the streets, where art and music festivals often attract thousands of people.

Beginning in the 1950s, many cities banned open containers of alcohol in public. Now Canton and several other cities are bringing it back — in a controlled fashion — to appeal to millennials and attract tourists and conventions.

In addition to Canton, other Ohio cities including Lancaster, Lorain, Middletown and Toledo launched public drinking areas this year, as did Mississippi cities such as Biloxi and Gulfport. In both Ohio and Mississippi, state law had to change before the cities could adjust their rules.

Last year, Nashville carved out a public drinking area between the convention center, a hotel and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, hoping that groups would be more likely to book all three venues if visitors could drink as they walk between them. And Lincoln, Nebraska, and Mobile, Alabama, created public drinking districts in 2013. Changes to state law were necessary in both states, as well as Tennessee.

Typically, the drinks must be in plastic cups, rather than in bottles or cans. And in most places, security guards or police officers patrol the borders of the district to make sure people don’t carry their beverages outside of it.

“You have boomers and millennials both seeking an urban lifestyle that’s driving demand for more nightlife districts,” said Jim Peters, who advises cities on how to take advantage of that desire. In



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Generally the experiments have proceeded smoothly, though last summer there were two shootings in Mobile’s Lower Dauphin Street Historic District, where public drinking is legal. In response, the city council approved an emergency measure in August banning public drinking after midnight, two hours before many bars close.

Canton credits the new policy for larger weekend crowds, peaking at 10,000 in June, or 3,000 more than last year’s high. Participating businesses levy a \$1 surcharge on alcoholic drinks “to go” to cover the cost of hiring off-duty police officers to provide additional security. Bar employees are tasked with picking up litter.

Police in Canton have reported only a slight increase in arrests and citations within the public drinking area, though they have issued more traffic tickets. Police attribute the uptick to having more officers downtown.

Rewards and Risks

Canton’s master plan stresses the need for a vibrant nightlife to attract the kind of educated millennials who have turned around other Rust Belt factory towns.

Canton’s population is 60 percent of what it was in the 1950s, and it collects about half as much tax revenue. But it has high hopes for new apartment buildings downtown and the planned expansion of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, which is located north of downtown.

“Our refreshment area is not an antidote for the challenges facing a Rust Belt city in the Midwest, but it is an ingredient,” said Edmond Mack, a city councilman. “It’s one of the steps we’re taking to stop the contraction and get our downtown growing and expanding again.”

Most bars and restaurants support the idea because they think it will boost sales and revenue.



Developers also have lobbied for public drinking districts so they can build mixed-use developments with outdoor plazas where residents can drink and socialize, said Peters of the hospitality group. And sometimes art galleries push for the change, envisioning “arts walks” where patrons can drink wine as they roam from gallery to gallery.

In Lincoln, the goal was to get the graduates of the University of Nebraska and of other local colleges to stick around instead of moving to places with a more vibrant nightlife.

“The question was how do we keep the young people in our city,” said Tessa Warner, business manager for the Railyard district.

“We set out to make it not a place for more people to drink more alcohol, but a place where people can come and congregate and socialize, and have a drink if they want,” Warner said.

Vibrancy, not Chaos

Peters said he advises cities considering a public drinking district to make alcohol part of a broader social or entertainment experience, whether it revolves around art, music or sports.

“If it gets to be all about the alcohol, that’s not good,” Peters said. “You want vibrancy. You don’t want chaos.”

A few cities long known for unrestrained outdoor partying recently have taken steps to curb it. In New Orleans, some neighborhoods have cut back on public drinking. Las Vegas has banned glass bottles outdoors to cut down on dangerous broken glass.

The shootings and other late-night incidents in Mobile’s public drinking district have sparked some second-guessing there. In 2014, Nashville leaders rejected a proposed public drinking district in the Lower Broad section, where most of the city’s famous honky-tonks reside. Members of Nashville’s Metro Council feared that increased drunkenness and underage drinking would threaten public safety.

Emily Evans, the former councilwoman who spearheaded opposition to the plan, said many bar owners were on her side despite the potential for more profit.

“Most of the owners think that if you’re having a beer you should be in a building where you can be observed and controlled,” Evans said. “Maybe in a smaller town you could keep [public drinking] under control, but I think it’s a terrible idea for Nashville.”

But in Mobile, supporters contend that the economic benefits of the public drinking district outweigh



the area, bringing the total to 51. Four more are planning to open in the next few months, according to Carol Hunter, spokeswoman for the Downtown Mobile Alliance.

“People know that they can come downtown and sit outside and enjoy a drink, and walk to the movies or walk to shows,” Hunter said. “That really does help cement downtown Mobile as a place to go.”

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