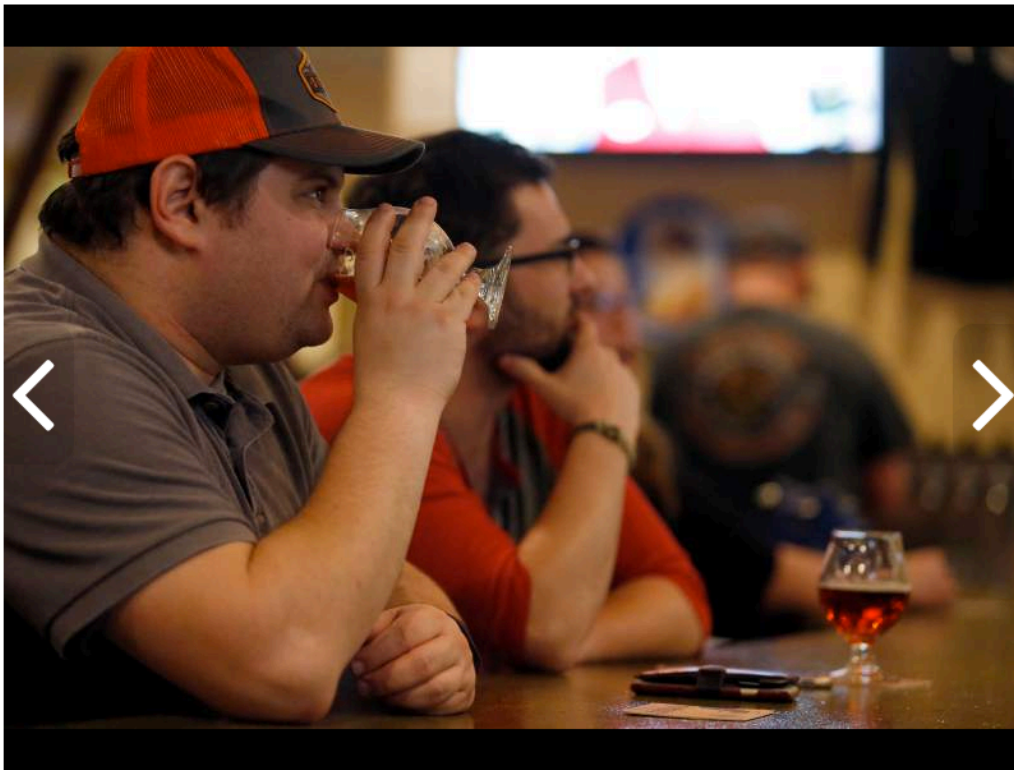


The Press Democrat

Legislature considers bill to extend closing time at bars until 4 a.m.



(1 of 5) Lenny Slutsky, left, and his friend Brian Connor watch a baseball game on television as they sample local beers at Local Barrel in Santa Rosa, California, on Thursday, March 9, 2017. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

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On busy nights when bartender Joleah Bilyeu hollers “last call” after 1:30 a.m. at the Round Robin in Santa Rosa, many of her customers would gladly stick around and keep spending their money, but state law forces bars and restaurants to stop serving alcohol at 2 a.m. Now, a bill in Sacramento could open the door for later closing times, allowing local governments to extend drinking hours to 4 a.m.

“Come closing time we’re trying to push people out,” said Bilyeu, who has been tending bar for 15 years. “It could be really lucrative to stay open later.”

The legislation, introduced by state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, would give local governments discretion when and where nightlife establishments could remain open until 4 a.m. Currently, buying or selling alcohol between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. is a misdemeanor.

While Bilyeu supports the idea, it is unlikely things will change in Sonoma County — even if the bill makes its way past Gov. Jerry Brown’s desk — unless local officials get a big push from bars, restaurants and their patrons.

“Nothing good happens after 2 a.m.,” said Drew Ferrante, owner of the Local Barrel, a bar in Santa Rosa that serves craft beer and wine. “Santa Rosa would never go for it.”

Supporters say the bill could be a boon for the restaurant and service industry. The change in the long-held 2 a.m. closing time has garnered the support of industry groups including the California Restaurant Association, the Golden Gate Restaurant Association and the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce. San Rafael-based Alcohol Justice, an industry watchdog organization, has opposed the measure. The bill is identical to one that was proposed in 2013 by former state Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, but failed to make it out of committee.

Wiener said his bill has bipartisan support, and that for bills of this nature it can take several attempts to win passage.

“When some people hear about this bill they assume every bar and club in California will be open to 4 a.m.,” said Wiener. “That’s absolutely not the case. It will give every community local control.”

Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, hasn’t taken a position on the bill, stating that it is still early in the process and the bill has yet to be discussed in committee. It’s scheduled to be heard on March 29.

“My bottom line on the bill is that it has to preserve local control,” McGuire said. “Local elected leaders have to have final say.”

Local officials seem cool on bringing any changes to the operating hours of bars and restaurants in Sonoma County.

“I can’t imagine there’s a need for that in Petaluma,” said Petaluma Mayor David Glass.

In Santa Rosa, a city trying to bring new life into its downtown, extended drinking hours hasn’t even been on the radar.

“It would have to be something that came as a request and talked about as a community,” said Santa Rosa Mayor Chris Coursey. “I haven’t heard anybody banging on my door asking for bars to stay open later.”

Chicago, New Orleans, New York and Washington, D.C., allow their bars and restaurants to stay open beyond 2 a.m., and 15 states allow cities to keep bars open into the wee hours of the morning.

Bilyeu contends as long as there is a security plan in place with a full security staff, safety issues wouldn’t be a problem.

Rules on intoxication would also have to be tightened, she said.

At the Local Barrel, Ferrante said allowing cities like San Diego and San Francisco to keep bars open later could work, and giving local governments the opportunity to extend alcohol service hours seems fair, but he likes things as they are in Sonoma County.

“I close at 10 p.m. because I don’t want to deal with the late-night drunk crowd,” he said. “Staying open later isn’t worth the extra money I could make.”

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Alcohol Justice · a day ago

"Local control" of alcohol is a myth. The alcohol producers, retailers and food and beverage industry front groups have mastered the art of convincing local governments that relaxing alcohol controls is a public convenience and necessity. Allowing bars to remain open until 4 a.m. will benefit those who make a living selling booze at the expense of tax payers and governments who have to clean up the mess of alcohol-related harm. At a time when there is so much uncertainty about public funding for public health and healthcare, it is pure negligence for any elected official to propose something that would undoubtedly cause more harm and more expense. Click here: <http://bit.ly/2mb0R40> to tell your legislators to stop the foolishness -- STOP Wiener's 4 a.m. Bar Bill!

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