

CALIFORNIA PORES OVER LATE-NIGHT DRINKING BILL



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California legislators have revived a bill to extend drinking hours to 4 a.m., this time including Fresno into its pilot program.

The Committee on Governmental Organization recently approved Senate Bill 58. It now moves onto the Senate Appropriations Committee before heading to the Senate floor and eventually to the California Assembly.

Last year, the bill was widely approved in both chambers of state congress before being vetoed by former-Governor Jerry Brown. Now, some supporters of the bill speculate they may find an ally in Gov. Gavin Newsom.

While some fear the bill may create a public nuisance and danger from drunk drivers, other local leaders in Fresno feel that if properly implemented, it could be “another tool” for Downtown revitalization.

In 2013, then-Senator Mark Leno in San Francisco proposed SB 635, which sought to deregulate the times alcohol could be sold both at restaurants and at liquor stores.

As a sort-of nod to that move, Fresno approved expanding operating hours for nightclubs in the city’s Downtown “Entertainment District,” or the areas around what is now Fulton Street, according to Mark Standriff, communications chief for the City of Fresno.

Mezcal Lounge on Van Ness Avenue signed on and allows dancing until 4 a.m.

Owner Ricardo Flores says that since then, people come from other parts of town and to other clubs to dance and socialize. While they don’t serve alcohol, they have food and other drinks to serve while allowing people a chance to sober up while having fun.

“I think it’s a good idea,” said Flores, “Especially because we’re going to generate more taxes for the state.”

Scott Weiner (D-San Francisco) introduced the bill as SB 905, when it included only nine cities in its pilot program. It’s now expanded to include Fresno into its pilot program that, if passed, would begin in 2021.

If approved under the new state congress and the new governor, each city would then have to go through a public process, according to Standriff.

What that would look like is still undetermined, but it would likely be limited to the area surrounding Fulton Street.

This might be another draw for revitalizing the area, said Fresno City Councilman Miguel Arias, whose district includes Fulton Street.

Tower District has its eclectic appeal with unique shops and Riverpark has the family atmosphere, he said. What a late-night-drinking bill might mean for Downtown is an adult-friendly area where business people or tourists staying in the areas numerous hotels can walk around and enjoy themselves.

“It would give us one more tool to distinguish ourselves from the entertainment and the nightlife in the city of Fresno,” said Arias.

What Arias supports is a version that would be limited on-site drinking, such as bars and nightclubs near Fulton Street that would be detached from neighborhoods.

Police Chief Jerry Dyer also supports a version of the law that would limit it to the downtown area.

“The hope in doing so is to create an entertainment district that is not disruptive to a particular neighborhood,” Dyer wrote in a statement to the Business Journal.

Others feel however that the bill would increase fatalities resulting from drunk drivers.

Critics feel that drivers leaving bars at 4 a.m. might begin to interfere with those beginning their morning commutes.

“I believe we have enough mischief from midnight to two without adding two more hours of mayhem,” Brown said in his veto message to SB 905, the predecessor to SB 58.

The advocacy group Alcohol Justice predicts a 230 percent increase during the hours of 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. should SB 58 pass, citing data from the website PourSafe.com.

Some believe drivers would trickle out considering the extended closing times rather than pouring all out at once between 1:30 and 2 a.m.

At Mezcal, Flores says it also gives people a chance to sober up. He also feels people have become more aware of the dangers of drunk driving and are using ride-sharing apps like Lyft or Uber more often.