

## MARYLAND

# Council members question liquor board tactics

## City bars run as package stores are said to bring violence and drugs

BY LYNN ANDERSON  
[SUN REPORTER]

City Council members questioned the enforcement tactics and community outreach efforts of the Baltimore Board of Liquor License Commissioners at a committee hearing last night at City Hall.

Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said she frequently hears complaints from constituents about liquor law enforcement, particularly about taverns that operate as package stores and rogue club owners who repeatedly violate local laws and require frequent police intervention.

She said the taverns operating as package stores are a particular problem in Park Heights. Many stores there do not operate bars, as the law requires, but sell virtu-

ally all of their alcohol to go. She said some clubs in other areas have become magnets for violence such as assaults, stabbings and shootings.

"It's the one constant complaint that I always hear," said Rawlings-Blake, referring to noisy, dirty, or dangerous bars. "I want our council and constituents to be better informed" about liquor laws and enforcement, she said.

Stephan Fogleman, chairman of the liquor board, told members of the City Council's Public Safety and Health Committee that the board — a state agency — is open to cooperating with the council to combat blight and crime. Fogleman told council members about recent fines collected from bars and liquor stores caught selling alcohol to underage patrons.

"In the last seven months, we've collected \$100,000 in fines from venues that sold alcohol" to people under 21, Fogleman said.

"That's money that goes to city coffers," he added.

Fogleman said the board is also working to find a solution to taverns that operate as package stores. He said that the agency has warned tavern owners that they must provide a seating area as well as a restroom for patrons. Fogleman said that tavern owners — many of whom have blocked bar areas with Plexiglas safety walls — have about three months to make the changes or risk fines or possible license revocation.

The board is taking enforcement seriously, Fogleman said. Today, it is to hold hearings on three clubs: Trip's Place on North Charles Street, Club Mate on South Hanover Street and Sky

Lounge on Marshall Street. The bars' liquor licenses could be revoked — a rare step — if the board finds that their continued operation is contrary to public welfare.

In May last year, the liquor board suspended the liquor license of Club Mate in Brooklyn for 10 days after owner Vu Huynh allowed two patrons under 21 to drink alcohol at his club, which is popular with college-age adults. There have also been reports of fights and drug activity.

In January, a female patron of the Charles Street clubs Trip's Place and Club Choices was assaulted, and in December, two patrons were shot after a fight broke out, according to liquor board and police records. In March 2006, a 19-year-old pregnant woman was shot and killed in front of the clubs.

A spokesman for Mayor Sheila Dixon said that members of the city's legal department, which has been working with police to stop violence at the Charles Street clubs, will also attend the liquor board hearing today.

Telephone calls to an attorney for the owner of Trip's Place, Anthony D. Triplin, were not returned yesterday. Trip's Place and Club Choices were recently listed for sale by real estate agent Don Yelle Triplin for \$25 million, according to her firm's Web site.

Neighborhood activists who have complained about some of the clubs say they have been victims of intimidation by bar owners and employees.

Huynh filed a \$1.5 million defamation suit in Baltimore Circuit

Court last week against two community members who have protested his establishment and videotaped fights and drug activity at the club, according to Michelle Wirzberger Pierce, an attorney with the Community Law Center who is working with them and their neighbors.

"[The lawsuit] was clearly meant to intimidate them," said Wirzberger Pierce.

Wirzberger Pierce is also working with residents who live near Sky Lounge in South Baltimore and Trip's Place, which shares a door and an owner with Club Choices in the Station North area. She said that intimidation has been used to dissuade neighbors of these clubs to complain.

"Neighbors told us they were terrified," Wirzberger Pierce said.

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