

How neighborhoods can serve notice to bad bars

Community Law Center teaches class

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Baltimore neighborhoods from Abell to Brooklyn have all struggled with the specter of a bad bar or liquor store opening within their boundaries.

Now, the Community Law Center is trying to help teach community activists how to fight back against bars and stores that are out of control.

During a class at the law center's offices in Hampden Oct. 21, staff attorney Michelle Wirzberger Pierce instructed residents on how to challenge bars and stores that cause problems in the neighborhoods.

She stressed that community groups have to be aware of the different types of liquor licenses. There are roughly 1,500 in the city.

Currently there is a moratorium on issuing new liquor licenses in the city, except for restaurant licenses. And to get a license, an establishment must make 40 percent of its receipts from food.

The moratorium doesn't mean a new liquor store or bar can't open, because existing licenses can be sold and transferred, Pierce said. But it's during a sale or transfer that a community group has the most power to organize to oppose a license transfer at Baltimore City liquor board hearings, she said.

Often, the board will recommend the business owners negotiate with the community before the board will decide whether to approve a transfer, Pierce said.

If the would-be owner of the liquor license does not want to cooperate, communities are urged to check out the owner's background, she said.

The liquor board could decide to withhold the license transfer because of "character" issues such as previous convictions, she said.

Residents should also request business plans from the would-be owners, Pierce said.

Communities should also verify whether the person seeking the transfer of the license owns property in the city, she said.

holders of city liquor licenses are required to own property or live in Baltimore, but often, someone looking to skirt the rules will list an address of a friend, Pierce said.

Communities can check property records to see if the transferee lives elsewhere, she said.

Another option is to check business records to find out whether the person whose address is listed has any financial stake in the company. If the property owner doesn't have a financial investment in the business, that can be a red flag for the liquor board, Pierce said.

Several controversial bars and liquor and package good stores have been in the news in recent months, especially on York Road.