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Early reaction lukewarm to city's late-night license plan

By [Jaime Malarkey](#)

Examiner Staff Writer 1/23/09

A proposal to require Baltimore businesses to apply for a license to operate between midnight and 6 a.m. was tabled amid mixed reaction from community activists and retailers Wednesday evening.

The proposal, sponsored by City Councilman Bill Henry, would establish a permitting process modeled after the city's liquor license system for late-night establishments such as gas stations and convenience stores. But retailers said the legislation would affect nearly 400 Baltimore businesses, including some grocery stores, coffee and donut shops, hotels and even train stations.

"We understand there is a problem but think the solution proposed is over-reaching," said Stanley Fine, a lawyer representing Royal Farms, a Baltimore-based company that operates 120 corporate-owned convenience stores.

"It's a few bad apples," Fine said at Wednesday's public hearing at City Hall.

Henry acknowledges the proposal was inspired by a single Exxon gas station near the Alameda in north Baltimore where he said "unsavory elements" congregate at night. The manager of the gas station has since agreed to add security, but the issue remains citywide, Henry said.

A city council subcommittee including Henry agreed to table the issue until an unscheduled work session in the spring.

Henry said he is considering mass exemptions for franchises and chains that sign a binding agreement with local communities, as well as for "legitimate grocery stores."

"That in no way, shape or form means that the bill is not needed," Henry said. "We just can't continue to let bad businesses terrorize communities

and do nothing about it."

Many community leaders expressed gratitude for the proposal, and said they are often too afraid to report illegal activity at late-night establishments in their neighborhood. Michelle Pierce, a staff attorney with the Baltimore-based Community Law Center, said youth centers and lodges are frequently operating as "juice bars," supplying mixers for patrons who bring their own liquor.

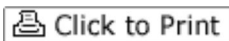
"Every once in awhile an establishment falls through the cracks and there is no where for us to go," Pierce said. "There is a vacuum of responsibility here."

Henry has proposed a \$250 annual fee for late-night licenses. The city's budget office recommended increasing the fee to \$400 per establishment, which assistant budget director Andrew Kleine said is necessary to cover \$120,000 in administrative costs.

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