

# Impact zones

*A new OLCC rule makes some Stark Street bar owners a touch nervous*

by Inga Sorensen

**A** rule recently adopted by the Oregon Liquor Control Commission may allow the city of Portland to place uniform restrictions on entire neighborhoods and could dictate to business owners when and how they operate their establishments. That has some in the Southwest Stark Street vicinity—an area inhabited by several gay-oriented bars—a touch nervous.

"I do believe this area could very well be targeted," says Greg Dugger, owner of Scandals, 1038 SW Stark St., a bar catering to the sexual minorities community. "I don't think that's because we're gay. It's just a reality that neighborhoods like this or the Castro or Greenwich Village foster a very social and urban climate. These types of neighborhoods often have to deal with traffic and noise problems."

Several weeks ago, the OLCC adopted a rule which would allow the city of Portland to ask the agency to designate alcohol impact areas and set uniform limitations specifying how alcohol may be sold in those areas. Backers of the measure say it's designed to reduce problems associated with street drinking, public intoxication, noisy conduct, or other late night disturbances associated with on-premises drinking.

Under the rule, Oregon cities with a population of more than 300,000—Portland is the only city to meet that criteria—may petition the OLCC to declare impact zones. If an area is deemed an alcohol impact zone, the OLCC could limit off-premises alcohol sales, restrict the hours alcohol is sold in that area, or set "any other limitations" to reduce the documented problems, such as limiting the number of new outlets in the area. Previously, limitations could be placed only on individual businesses—not entire areas.

"Sometimes it is not possible to identify one or two businesses that might be the cause of alcohol-related problems like noise and public urination. That's because some streets are crowded with a number of establishments that serve alcohol and cater to a late night crowd," explains OLCC spokeswoman Louise Casper, adding, "We want people to know that we take this issue very seriously and we have a long list of requirements the city must meet when petitioning us to declare an alcohol impact zone."

According to the measure, the city is first required to work "in good faith" with affected businesses, residents and city staff to develop a voluntary program to address the problems. It must "make reasonable efforts" to notify those likely to be affected and offer them the opportunity to participate in the city's process. It further mandates that public hearings be held so interested parties may share their views.

Casper says Portland officials have not approached the OLCC about declaring any area an impact zone, though there have been concerns about drinking and late night noise in various parts of the city, including Northwest 21st Avenue, Old

Town, and Southwest Stark Street, which is home to Panorama, Silverado, Scandals and C.C. Slaughters, bars and dance clubs catering to gay, lesbian and alternative crowds.

Dugger says business owners on Stark Street have been meeting for years to address problems. "I started the group in 1987, when we were having problems with gay-bashings," he says. "It's a loosely knit group of business owners—both gay and straight—that work together."

Group members have met with Portland Police Bureau officials who, says Dugger, have been "extremely helpful." During the past several months Portland police have beefed up their foot patrols in the Stark Street area to improve safety.

Many members of the Downtown Community Association, a neighborhood association that represents the interest of citizens residing in several downtown neighborhoods, including Old Town, Stark Street and the Park Blocks, are strong supporters of the OLCC's new rule.

"From what I've seen, people in [the Stark Street area] are really working together more and more to resolve problems," says Lisa Horne, chair of the DCA's public safety committee. She also recently became involved with the organization's Stark Street workgroup, which comprises business owners and residents concerned with alcohol-related problems in the neighborhood. "I have heard of no plans to have the Stark Street area declared an alcohol impact zone, and, please, let me stress that we view this [rule] as a last resort."

An uglier aspect of the gay and lesbian community's history involves government crack-downs and police raids on gay bars. This reality bol-

sters fears that an area may be targeted because it has many gay-oriented businesses.

"There may be concerns about gay businesses among some members of a neighborhood association, though I doubt it would come up at a public meeting," says Sharon McCormick, crime prevention coordinator for the city's Office of Neighborhood Associations. "I don't know if that's the case, but it could be an underlying concern."

"In no way was this rule created as a way to discriminate against people. In fact, [the measure] specifically forbids that from happening," says OLCC's Casper, adding the new rule explicitly states the city cannot "take into consideration or make any proposal based on age, race, sex, disability, marital status, national origin, sexual orientation, color or religion" when petitioning the OLCC.

Horne says, "There have been so many attacks on the gay community during the past couple of years that I can understand why there would be a heightened sensitivity around something like this."

DCA President Vern Rifer adds: "As the father of a lesbian daughter, I can tell you that I am very concerned about discrimination.... That's not what this rule is about—it's about making neighborhoods more livable for residents. It's about addressing problems of noise, litter, car prowls and crime."

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