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DRINKING BY THE NUMBERS

OLCC stats show it's easier to find bars, distilleries and liquor stores around Lane County

BY BOB KEEFER

Looking for a bar in Lane County? You shouldn't have to look too hard. According to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission, as of Feb. 7 Lane County had 331 licensed establishments where you can buy distilled spirits by the glass. That number includes 193 in Eugene and 53 in Springfield.

That adds up to one bar for every 1,015 residents of Lane County: one for every 860 in Eugene, and one for every 1,135 in Springfield. Those licensed establishments cover everything from a handful of non-profit private clubs, such as the Elks, to full-on commercial barrooms and restaurants open to the public, says Christie Scott, alcohol program spokesperson for the OLCC in Portland.

Bars are on the increase, she said. Ten years ago, Lane County had 273 licensed liquor outlets, with 147 in Eugene and 42 in Springfield. Those numbers reflect a 21 percent increase in the number of licensed hard liquor outlets in Lane County; a 26 percent increase in Springfield; and a 31 percent increase in Eugene.

(For the numerically obsessed: In 2006, the population ratios were one bar for every 1,244 people in Lane County, one for every 1,011 in Eugene and one for every 1,359 in Springfield.)

"We've seen increases in liquor licenses across all categories," Scott says. "But we've also seen significant population increases in all those areas."

The biggest current boom for liquor sales is in licensed distilleries — the places where hard liquor is made. Lane County had two distilleries a decade ago; it now has nine — six of those in Eugene, one in Springfield and one in Oakridge (the other is in unincorporated county territory).

And beyond that, since about 2011, Scott said, the OLCC has been licensing distillery tasting rooms, similar to wine tasting rooms. Two have opened in Lane County: Heritage Distilling Co., at 110 Madison Street, and Thinking Tree Spirits, 88 Jackson Street.

"Oregon is ahead of the national trend," Scott says. "We are the leading state in distilleries."

All this reflects a national trend toward increased consumption of hard liquor, from whiskey to vodka and gin, as opposed to wine and beer, Scott says. Leading that trend, she says, is that more middle-aged women are drinking whiskey now, instead of the traditional white wine or sweet cocktails.

Don't care to hit the bar scene? Rather drink at home?

Lane County has 18 licensed liquor retail stores, including five in Eugene and three in Springfield. (There are 267 statewide.) That means Lane County now has one liquor store for every 18,870 customers.

Two more liquor outlets, Scott says, are about to open for business, both in existing retail stores.

This reflects a change in OLCC policy. In the past, the agency generally licensed only retailers who specialized in liquor sales.

The exception was extremely remote places, such as Lake County's tiny Christmas Valley, where OLCC for years licensed a small retail liquor shelf at the local hardware store. (Perhaps to the chagrin of Christmas Valley residents, the store was recently sold, Scott says, and the license lapsed.)

"That sort of combination store was really successful in rural areas," she says. "So now we're trying to improve the experience for the customers elsewhere."

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