

Marin Voice: Late-call bar bill raises concern about public safety

By Carson Benowitz-Fredericks

July 7, 2017

Growing up in Marin, I used to joke that there are three things to do for fun: hike, bike and leave.

Young Marinites are dependent on the neighboring urban areas for entertainment, while San Francisco and other neighboring cities benefit economically from this “bridge and tunnel” income.

Recently, Scott Wiener, a state senator from San Francisco, introduced a bill that would benefit San Francisco and unleash a flood of alcohol-related harm on Marin under the guise of “local control.”

Thanks in part to a flurry of hackneyed amendments passed without public scrutiny, the Assembly Governmental Operations Committee passed it. Now it is imperative that the Assembly as a whole reject it.

Sen. Wiener’s bill, SB 384, allows for localities to extend bar operating hours until 4 a.m. The bill’s supporters appropriate progressive language.

A sympathetic Los Angeles Times article connected October’s fatal Ghost Ship fire. “Local control” itself is a public health watchword for legislation that empowers city governments to pass protective legislation when the state refuses. But there is nothing progressive about SB 384.

The bill harms smaller venues — especially all-ages ones — and dumps the cleanup on outlying jurisdictions. It serves as a giveaway to a small, urban commercial lobby, with the costs born by taxpayers across the state.

While San Rafael seems unlikely to establish a late last-call district, it is not hard to see 4 a.m. bars popping up in the Mission or SOMA. Those areas would draw drinkers from throughout the Bay Area. That would lead to immediate increases in noise, violence and property damage. (It would also put economic pressure on San Rafael to cave.)

Once revelers get out of the city, the wave of booze hits Marin.

Dangerously intoxicated drivers already pose a late-night issue on Highway 101. A 4 a.m. last call puts these same drivers on the freeway — with two extra hours of fatigue — right as the morning rush picks up.

Studies aggregated by the U.S. Community Preventive Services Task Force show that extended last-call hours create measurable increases in crash injuries. It’s not just commuters in harm’s way; the “reverse

drunk commute” shares the road with young Marinites, who are essentially forced to drive by public transit cutbacks.

The city is where they go to do something at night. SB 384’s supporters know this, which is why they invoke the Ghost Ship victims. But the Ghost Ship fire happened at 11:30 p.m. It wasn’t caused by a dearth of late-night clubs; it was caused by alternative venues being squeezed out of the area by skyrocketing real estate.

SB 384 allows big nightclubs to maximize profits by selling more alcohol. It does nothing to promote safe access to cultural activities for young Californians.

If anything, it makes nightlife more dangerous. More alcohol-serving venues means fewer all-ages spaces, pushing them into unregulated spaces like Ghost Ship.

The Marin County Board of Supervisors, to its credit, came out against the bill, as did Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the California Alcohol Policy Alliance, and Marin’s Assembly member Marc Levine.

They saw that the bill serves no real need, while creating real harm.

We know culture thrives in the crucible of California with a 2 a.m. last-call. We have witnessed the Los Angeles art scene, the Berkeley punk scene, hip-hop in Oakland and South Central, Beats in San Francisco, and the statewide Summer of Love. We also know that alcohol costs California \$35 billion per year, and leads to 10,500 deaths.

What, then, does rolling back alcohol protections such as last-call times do to benefit areas like Marin?

As the bill now heads to the Appropriations Committee and on to a general floor vote, we hope the members will come to their senses and realize just how little there is to gain, and just who it is who stands to lose?

Carson Benowitz-Fredericks is the research manager at Alcohol Justice, the Buck Trust-created, Marin-based nonprofit group formed to address alcohol abuse.