

Improving the Entertainment Area of Old Town Chinatown

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The City of Portland has been engaged in the Street Closure Pilot Project (SCPP) since December of 2012 and planned to continue through October of 2013. The SCPP has prompted conversations regarding the entertainment offered in Old Town Chinatown and the conflicting interests associated with the area.

The City of Portland Noise Officer and Liquor Licensing Program started looking at Old Town Chinatown as an opportunity for entertainment planning several years ago, as liquor license density and the associated impacts increased all over the City of Portland. The City of Portland has a unique opportunity to positively impact the growth and development of one of the oldest and most culturally rich neighborhoods in Portland.

The current SCPP came out of research performed by the Portland Police Bureau's Entertainment Detail, a unit designated to police and problem solve alcohol related concerns at bars and taverns in the core of Portland. The model followed was the result of personal observation of a similar strategy which resulted in positive impacts to public safety in Vancouver BC. Although similar reductions in crime have been witnessed in the Old Town Street Closure, long term strategies and additional experimentation are still needed. The following questions have been asked of City Staff:

- 1) What does 3rd Avenue bring to the community?
- 2) Are there strategies that can be deployed to support positive growth in this and surrounding areas?
- 3) What strategies can be deployed to provide a safety net for the current nightlife district?
- 4) Should nightlife venues be supported, and if so; in what way?
- 5) Does the street closure benefit the whole community?
- 6) Are there other locations that may be better suited for nightlife venues? If so, where?
- 7) How can long-term strategies be sustainable?

The Street Closure currently in effect on 3rd Avenue has inaccurately had the informal designation of an Entertainment District (ED), when in fact it is only a part of a whole potential entertainment experience in the Old Town Chinatown Neighborhood and surrounding area. If one were to visit the street closure and the 6 alcohol outlets in the Street Closure area in Old Town, one of the first questions would be “what about the venues on 4th, south of Burnside, and just East of the Park Blocks?” In fact, the Old Town Chinatown neighborhood has 76 licensed establishments that offer a variety of entertainment. The current Street Closure clearly does not encompass the full potential, nor necessarily the appropriate location of a potential true Entertainment District in Old Town Chinatown. Nightlife is currently clustered around 3rd Avenue, but it may be appropriate to incentivize development of other focal points that would have a lower late night impact on neighborhood residents.

Third Avenue is also home to several at-risk housing projects, and other residential development. This has led to conflicting interests as the businesses operate primarily during sleeping hours, within feet of residential windows. Other cities that have had a similar conflict of interest have seen some resolution by creating a buffer of space between nightlife venues and residences, or by enacting regulations to minimize impacts. Evaluation of the whole of Old Town Chinatown is needed to assess whether the venues on 3rd Avenue are appropriate and whether local policy can incentivize mitigation.

In an effort to build upon the success of the SCPP, the City of Portland sent several ambassadors to Austin Texas, where they have similar conflicts between residential populations, social service providers and thriving entertainment venues. Austin's strategy has been to embrace the entertainment industry while providing safeguards and structural accommodations to protect other interests. They have implemented multiple official Entertainment Districts. This strategy has been supported primarily due to the fact that entertainment is an economic driver for the City of Austin. As one of the largest industries in Oregon, alcohol serving establishments also stand to be a potential economic driver for Portland, if their diversity and integration with other components of the Portland community can be achieved. Additionally, City Liquor Licensing staff has researched similar efforts in Wisconsin, Florida, and Arizona for best practice strategies.

The following short and long term recommendations are put forward by the Office of Neighborhood Involvement for integration into a larger plan being overseen by PDC. These are designed to minimize the adverse impact of alcohol sales, diversify the entertainment experience in the area supporting the existing community, and create a plan to manage the area effectively.

Recommendation #1 –

Promote best practices of alcohol service through Entertainment licensing

Short term - Entertainment Licensing – Harm reduction

Recognizing the unique considerations that nightlife venues bring to a community; entertainment licensing should be a requirement of venues wishing to do business in Old Town Chinatown after 10pm as a way to proactively address potential harm. Although this requires additional resources on the front end in terms of staff and evaluation, the potential mitigation of harm makes it compellingly cost effective on the back end. Wisconsin witnessed the success of a similar program (Responsible Hospitality Industry, Webinar, and September 5th, 2013).

Not unlike other cities internationally, violent crime and disturbances tend to cluster in nightlife districts in Portland and be associated with a high number of drinking establishments. Two decades of research in the US, Canada, and Europe supports that the environment created by nightlife districts and alcohol can cause aggregate harm (Cusimano, Marshall, Rinner, Jiang, Chapman, 2010). In a temporal analysis of violent crimes with associated injuries conducted in Toronto Canada, it was found that high-risk populations are drawn to nightlife districts to engage in high-risk activities including alcohol consumption and drug use. Previous studies have also supported that certain characteristics of nightlife districts including inconvenient access points, overcrowding, and permissive social environments are key factors that contribute to violence in nightlife areas (Homel, 2001).

Density of nightlife venues have been a moving target in the last decade in Downtown Portland, as well as other cities in the nation. In *Where the Palm Grown: The Ybor City revitalization project*, Alexandra Fitos describes nightlife venue as a particular operation characterized by a drinking atmosphere, entertainment appropriate for an adult audience, and relatively no food or other amenities. Research tells us that density of licensed establishments can lead to an increase in crime, and that violence when perpetrated under the influence of alcohol tends to lead to more injuries. The general reaction by municipal governments has been to utilize police and enforcement agencies to crack down on problem hot spots with the unfortunate consequence of simply watching the issues mushroom in another location. Research supports effective strategies that mitigate harm, focusing on the environment (Finney, A., 2004). In order to create a successful long term model, there must be acceptance that there is a market for these types of venues, and therefore, they will exist (Peters & Lakomski, 2010). Simply enforcing them out is reactive at best, and at worst a resource drain. Entertainment licensing, a strategy in use in many other cities, would be a proactive strategy.

ONI suggests Entertainment licensing be implemented as a pilot project due to the saturation of nightlife venues in the Old Town Area, and incorporate at least the following:

- Nightlife venue specific training incorporating security protocols, over service education, etc.
- Sound mitigation plan incorporating requirement for training, equipment, or potential structural modifications.
- Security requirements – Professional private security is clearly an important factor for reducing harm in research related to nightlife districts. Untrained security can and do escalate problems. Oregon security has steadily increased in professionalism in the last 5 years.
- Crime Prevention through Environmental Design Evaluation – Offered through Portland’s Crime Prevention Program, this would address potential spatial characteristics that can lead to frustration, noise that can cause increased arousal and anxiety, and storefront components that may lead to a normative permissiveness. (Anything Noise Control could add here?)
- Promoter Registration to operate as a hub of communication in order to identify problematic performers that have victimized members of the industry
- Partnership Agreements – Districts are often characterized by the expectations of their community. Clearly defined expectations utilizing Partnership Agreements or a Good Neighbor Program can ensure that the developments in the ED coincide with community standards.

Long term – Designate a Formal Entertainment District or Identity for the area

The environment in which alcohol is served is a clear indicator of harm. Environmental factors can be influenced by local policy, thereby reducing risk (Peters & Lakomski, 2010).

Although there is a clear nexus of risk with nightlife venues, alcohol, and density, research in Australia indicates that density of alcohol establishments become natural destination spots for many populations as they are marketed for leisure (Birmingham, 2001), and the potential for economic growth can be positively associated with them (Fitos, 2004).

An Entertainment District designation creates an identity for a location within a city. It comes with the inherent benefit of public knowledge that the area is ‘designated’ for a unique purpose or vision (Peters & Lakomski, 2010). Currently there are three Entertainment Districts in the

Downtown Austin Area, and two in formation. These designations were achieved by Council vote. The Entertainment District designation does not only encompass the areas where bars are congregated, but incorporates a larger vision for where Austin anticipates and encourages entertainment to grow. They are not alone, Ybor City, Florida, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and San Jose, California have utilized a similar approach, designating a particular area as Entertainment zones, and developing a comprehensive strategy. An Entertainment District designation allows the cities referenced to approach this project with a global vision, utilizing the infrastructure currently in place, complementing other developments, and providing a positive long-term framework for the community as a whole. Portland would do well to emulate Austin's broad and long-term vision.

A true Entertainment District designation in Portland should be for a larger area than the SCPP, incentivizing development that would capitalize on density of entertainment offerings in an area while mitigating potential negative impacts on residences. In attached appendix A, a potential border of a formal Entertainment District is proposed and should be included in the framework for discussion with PDC as they develop the 5 year action plan.

Recommendation #2 –

Encourage Diversification of the Entertainment in Old Town Chinatown

Short term –

Incorporate a Night Market on the Davis festival Streets - The Portland Business Alliance was awarded a contract to help support the SCPP with cleaning personnel and amenities to address livability issues. The City of Portland should consider support broadening this role to include programming of the festival streets with a Traditional Chinese Night Market.

There have been concerns about limited business activity in the SCPP during the day and early evening with existing businesses primarily operating in the late evenings. Expanding the hours and programming for the area results in a much more vibrant attraction that goes beyond the focus of alcohol consumption in the late evening. In order to achieve a positive Entertainment District that attracts diverse populations, nightlife venues must be dense enough to attract a critical mass (Briscoe & Donnelly, 2001). There is simply no real-estate left for expansion of nightlife venues in the 3rd and Couch area. A more neighborhood or festival programming could work well in integrating the communities that are present on 3rd Ave, while encouraging the propagation of nightlife venues in a different sector of Old Town Chinatown .

Large Single Day Events – Encourage large events already well attended to shift their venue to Old Town Chinatown through reductions in permit costs. Well established events, such as fun runs, centered in Old Town would bring a participant demographic that may not otherwise be present because the area has previously been perceived as unsafe and unattractive.

Establish partnership with Culturally Iconic Businesses in the area – Create an identity for the area using well established positive businesses including “Darcelle’s”, a nationally recognized, historical, alternative lifestyle entertainment spot in the heart of Old Town

Chinatown. This will help to alleviate the issues that arise when an area caters to a polarized group, helping to diversify the experience and therefore the population attracted to the area.

Community Integration/Involvement – Portland has great passion from the community in the Downtown and Old Town Chinatown neighborhoods. Community involvement at the planning stages for this area is essential for developing a robust and diverse retail experience. The Downtown Neighborhood Association in Austin is highly involved in the development of the vision of Austin Downtown, including its entertainment areas. Additionally, the president of the Downtown NA also sits on the board to the Downtown Austin Alliance, representing the residential base. The Old Town Chinatown community should be a member of any management team for the area.

Long Term –

Streamline permitting to support successful renovation – Work with property owners to reduce the cost associated with historical building renovation. Nightlife venues cluster in properties where it is cheap to do business. Unfortunately, the historical properties in downtown have struggled to achieve the necessary permitting and permissions to renovate, making their properties less attractive to a broad base of businesses.

Low Interest Loans – Additional consideration could be given to businesses wishing to diversify the experience of Old Town Chinatown and partner with the community in a way that is positive to all involved. ONI recommends the City of Portland institute a low interest loan program for properties to achieve historical renovation, and soundproofing. Austin instituted a low interest loan for bars/music venues that could be obtained for essential soundproofing. This was utilized for businesses that interface with residential properties, and need the expertise of a sound engineer to help mitigate situations that would otherwise result in violations.

Enforcement Zones – In both Austin and Vancouver BC, the police and District Attorney utilized enhanced prosecution zones in their entertainment areas. Vancouver partnered with probation and parole to ensure that violent offenders were not allowed in the Entertainment Districts. This greatly reduced the number of street conflicts. In Austin, low level crime was pursued with special consideration from the District Attorney's Office to change the norms of the area and engender respect from the residential and non-residential community for the area. ONI suggests a similar localized public order ordinance be explored to support the standardized norms the community wishes to achieve.

Spot zoning – Zone specific blocks for specific activity in order to encourage variety in retail businesses. Some of the sectors in Old Town Chinatown should come with some livability protections. The current Street Closure Pilot Project area is not ideal for nightlife venues as they share storefronts with social service providers and vulnerable residential populations. Other areas should be incentivized for café use, nightlife, and pedestrian use (e.g. Ankeny Street), while still others should be developed and designed for outdoor staged entertainment and events.

A comprehensive plan should be considered through the designation of an Entertainment District (ED). Within Old Town Chinatown is the potential for recognizing the unique qualities already

present in certain sectors. Third Avenue is home to many residential properties with two more properties in development. Noise has been the number one concern expressed to the City of Portland by the residential population. Some of the businesses on 3rd Ave and encompassed in the current Street Closure project have expressed a desire to cater to the evolving and growing residential population rather than the nightlife crowd who tend to come from outside the neighborhood at later hours. This plan should support the evolving infrastructure in Old Town Chinatown and the surrounding area, be tailored to support the positive qualities, and improve upon the negative aspects.

While in Austin, City staff visited the social service providers just outside of the 6th Street Entertainment District. The ARCH, a homeless shelter and day center on which our own Bud Clark Commons was modeled, is located on 8th Street. In addition to the ARCH, 4 other properties that house the homeless are in close proximity to the Entertainment Core. The difference from Portland is that the social services were in close proximity of the ED but not within the ED. Even this close proximity presents challenges for Austin, however the removal of the two populations from each other even by 2 blocks seems to have provided a much needed buffer, and reduced conflict substantially.

Some Entertainment Districts in Austin Texas are located within residential zones, and these have not been free of conflict. An example is Rainy Street, a newly formed District that refurbished old houses into bars/nightclubs/ and a food cart attraction. Many of the residents have moved out leaving vacant properties. Other conflicts that have arisen between residential and entertainment venues are due to the development of high rise condominiums since 2000, introducing a residential base that was not centered in the downtown core of Austin previously. Portland can learn from this unfortunate dynamic by addressing the infrastructure concerns now in areas where a residential base is already established and likely to develop further.

Recommendation #4 –

Continue the Street Closure as an at-will strategy not a permanent solution

Given the current make-up of 3rd Ave, the Street Closure is an effective crowd management tool. However, it may not be supported long term, and the City should have the flexibility to discontinue it if necessary. Additionally, although the Street Closure Pilot Project was initiated in the winter, a notoriously slow time for nightlife venues in Portland, it was done so largely to ensure that police were not overwhelmed with incidents while trying to manage a new project, not because that was believed to be the time when the strategy would have the most positive impact.

Both Vancouver, BC and Austin Texas have shown Portland the value of using city authority to close the street and effectively manage crowds. In both locations city staffs have visited as well as others researched, the tool has been used to control an otherwise volatile environment, and has been used appropriately in Old Town as well. In Austin, street closure is not a planned event, but a common strategy. It is so common that the public expects it; but it can happen anytime between 9pm to midnight, utilizing construction barricades.

If the Mayor's Office feels that street closure is a strategy that merits implementation on a regular schedule, ONI suggests utilizing this strategy mainly during the busy months, June through September, rather than throughout the year. However, it should mirror the use in other cities as a crowd-management strategy, without the amenities currently contracted, as those resources may be better spent on some of the other recommendations here.

Recommendation #5 –

Use a multi-disciplinary approach: Designate personnel from various expertise areas to address the concerns in the area

Short term -

Create a Multi-Disciplinary Workgroup -

Cities, including Portland, are often asked to oversee entertainment activities from many different viewpoints and areas of expertise. Fire Bureau provides expertise in fire safety, police for public safety concerns, etc. Portland should designate personnel from various City hubs of expertise including Noise Control, Crime Prevention, Bureau of Development Services, Planning, Police, Fire, Special Events, and Liquor Licensing into a cohesive group with specific priorities.

ONI staff is limited and already burdened with full program workloads, as are other bureaus staffs, making the "Multi-Disciplinary Workgroup" a challenge to convene in balance with other priorities. ONI has convened such workgroups in the past but struggled with reaching actionable outcomes due to lack of authority over partners.

ONI recommends that a workgroup be convened by staff from the Mayor's or a Commissioner's office so that it has the appropriate level of authority and ability to garner interest and commitment from the wide range of bureaus represented.

Consider alternative approaches to permitting and enforcement -

The Multi Disciplinary Workgroup should evaluate existing permitting processes in Portland and identify areas of improved coordination and enforcement, considering efforts that have proven effective in other jurisdictions. The City of Portland is home to 2800 liquor license establishments. As the City felt the effects of the recession, the alcohol/entertainment industry flourished. The City of Portland has many events and projects that incorporate alcohol venues, entertainment, and community. In addition to the Old Town Street Closure Project and the potential first Entertainment District, Portland has also struggled with the management of Last Thursday on Alberta Street, and the development of a strong density of establishments on commercial districts that interface with our residential communities (Belmont, Mississippi, etc).

Although business districts are a powerfully stabilizing component of a community, alcohol outlet density can be severely harmful to a community. It is important that careful thought be given to the environment in which alcohol density is occurring. This is only achievable with multiple stakeholders and expertise at the table.

- The City of Austin formed an Office of Entertainment and Music in 2009. The City of Austin has embraced the music scene as a valuable economic driver and the need to streamline the expertise required for efficiency was defined as a City priority. This Office consolidated the programs that interact and are impacted by licensing, events and permitting to provide a more coordinated process and response to these issues.
- The City of Milwaukee also created two positions to liaison for entertainment out of the Chief's office, with designated support staff. These approaches have given these jurisdictions the longevity and sustainability to adequately manage the unique challenges of entertainment in their areas.
- San Jose California allocated a position with the City manager to serve as liaison between City government and Entertainment Zone stakeholders and to staff an advisory committee to analyze codes, procedures and opportunities for development of the Entertainment Zone.

Similarly, Portland officials tasked with other duties often need to come together to resolve an issue or concern regarding the planning, management and execution of a particular event or district. This is usually done ad hoc, with little success in ensuring action items are pursued rigorously. This has resulted in many band aid approaches without clear strategies to proactively address the core issues, and no sustainability.

The City may find that a consolidated effort mitigates the extraordinary costs associated with dealing with these issues with a fragmented approach. A coordinated approach could be used to improve special event licensing, entertainment licensing, promoter registry, and developing best practices for entertainment venues.

As Council considers the 5 year action plan developed by PDC for this area, and the previously adopted Vision's document prepared by the Old Town Chinatown Community, long term strategies should be the unification of these two documents in a cohesive strategy that can also be experimental and evolving. The short term recommendations here will help build the foundation for positive change in this cultural epicenter, and should be considered in evaluating the current SCPP in October as well as incorporated into the PDC Action Plan.

References

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