

Midlands Voices: City Council should have taken action against local bar

Written by Chris Wagner

On May 18, the Omaha City Council discussed whether it should hold a hearing in response to several serious liquor violations reported at The Good Life Sports Bar & Grill at 180th and Pacific in Elkhorn. The evidence brought forward by the city law and police departments seemed overwhelming. An intoxicated 20-year-old who crashed his vehicle last December and broke multiple vertebrae indicated that he and other underage youth drank alcohol illegally at The Good Life. Initial efforts by the police to obtain the security video from the bar were met with resistance from both the manager and the owner of that location.

After the police returned with a warrant and encountered further delays by the business, they eventually discovered that the video evidence had been erased. Law enforcement also had to warn the owner to refrain from contacting police officers not directly involved in the case to get information about and interfere with the investigation. Police reports further stated that he insinuated he would contact “Todd” — apparently referring to Todd Schmaderer, the chief of police — to avoid consequences from the incident.

Former employees offered additional information in support of a revocation hearing by detailing other instances in which they raised concerns with the bar’s management that minors were drinking there. At their May 18 meeting, council members were shown a group text sent to Good Life employees by the bar’s owner, whose livelihood depends on alcohol sales. The text said: “To be clear. We want ppl drinking. Obviously. Tell servers to learn. We are NOT ID experts. Were [sic] not out to FIND fakes. We card. If ID isn’t obviously fake and says 21, we serve. These will say UNDER 21. Should be obvious.”

Another former employee testified to the council, saying her sister was disfigured in an accident at the Good Life balcony in May 2020 and is suing the bar. She noted that the video evidence that was subpoenaed in her sister’s case had also “gone missing after it was requested,” similar to the video evidence covering this incident related to underage youth from December 2020.

With this information in hand, the council should have set the revocation hearing and sent a strong message to the bar (and the industry) that serving alcohol to minors will not be tolerated due to the serious injuries and deaths that can result, in addition to the fact that destroying evidence is completely unacceptable and outside of the law. Furthermore, the City Council can act independently of the criminal justice system, a point the city’s own law department attempted to convey to the council.

The assistant city attorney perhaps said it best when asked about postponing the hearing in order to allow the Douglas County Attorney’s Office or the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission to take action: “It wouldn’t necessarily preclude the council from taking action at a future time, but as the passage of time keeps growing, it gets harder and harder to make the case that this is an important action to take if the person is not of good character and fitness if they are essentially able to continue going without further violations.”

In the end, council members appeared to be swayed by the idea of needing additional testimony from an IT expert about the destruction of video. They came to this conclusion despite numerous police reports, bodycam footage and other evidence showing that the video may have been intentionally erased to cover up illegal and dangerous activity at a bar.

Unfortunately, the City Council missed a key opportunity to put bars across the city on notice that preventing underage drinking is a priority. Instead, they kicked the can down the road and put more lives at risk.