Cracking down on underage

Nightclub owners doubt council plan will make a difference

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LAFAYETTE — Some nightclub owners, USL students and law enforcement officers are doubtful that requiring bar patrons to be at least 21 will cut down on violence and underage drinking at area clubs.

Recent high-profile cases of violence at the McKinley Strip has led the City-Parish Council to consider a law that would prevent 18- to 20-year-olds from entering clubs that sell alcohol.

But nightclub owner Hans Peckhaus said the best way to deter underage drinking and disputes is better security and stricter enforcement of drinking laws by both the clubs and area police.

And that is exactly what club owners and local police are doing, he said.

USL student Misty Bourque feels the same.

"There's really no point in barring them, they'll find a way to get in and they'll find a way to drink, unless there's a real chance of getting caught and fined," the 19-year-old student said.

As far as fighting goes, Bourque said, "It really doesn't matter what age you are. If you have a temper and high alcohol intake, you'll get in a fight anyway."

Capt. Mike Savoie of the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office said, "I don't think there's any more problems out there now than there have been. And, it doesn't just happen on the Strip, it happens anywhere when you get that many people together drinking."

But City-Parish Council Chairman Daryl Schouest said the Lafayette Police Department has reported an 11 percent increase in police calls around the McKinley Strip area.

"I believe if you put fewer people in that age category in that environment, you're going to have fewer problems," Schouest said.

Still, Savoie said, banning 18- to 20-year-olds from all clubs may not be the answer.

"A lot of these places have foosball, pool or other things to do than just drink and if you keep those kids from going in there, you're basically putting them on the street," Savoie said.

USL student Ann-Marie Cain agreed.

"There's really a lack of places for people our age to go, other than the Strip. It's a place that we can go socialize with our friends, and it's pretty cheap," Cain, 18, said.

George Favalora, operations manager at The Keg, said, "If they're going to do this, they need to look at it statewide. If they're going to have all these people driving down winding, country roads to some little bars where they can be served."

Other than being ineffective, Cain said she believes the law would also be unfair.

"I think the government should pick one age, 18 or 21, and stick with that. If they choose 21, then they shouldn't let us vote, try us as adults, or make us go into the military," she said.

City officials have also drafted a resolution that would hold bar owners responsible if someone underage is caught drinking in their establishment, Police Chief Charles Crenshaw said.

"If they want to hold us responsible, then they need to hold USL, Downtown Alive!, and all the other groups responsible. On the same weekend that the Strip was raided and 12 citations (for underage drinking) were given there, there were 42 citations given at a USL tailgate party that had about the same number of people," Peckhaus said.

Bar owners will meet with Schouest next week to discuss the issue.