New law means changes at Strip bars

By Dan McCaleb
Staff Writer

What does the future hold for nightclubs along the McKinley Street Strip? With a new law going into effect Aug. 15 that prohibits businesses from selling alcohol to anyone under 21 years of age, Strip bar owners are starting to ask themselves exactly that.

"It's definitely going to hurt business, especially on the Strip," Shannon Wilkerson, owner of Shanahan's on the Strip and The Bulldog on General Mouton, said. "I don't think many of the Strip bars could afford to lose all of that customer base."

Because of its proximity to the University of Southwestern Louisiana campus, McKinley Street Strip clubs, such as Shanahan's, Maco's, Nite Caps and The Keg, have been the popular hangout of thousands of USL students, more than half of which are under the age of 21.

Up until now, USL students ranging in age from 18 to 20 accounted for a large percentage of the business that many of the McKinley Street bars took in on a given night. Anticipating that the new law would be passed, Wilkerson said he has been conducting polls at both of his clubs.

"About 15 percent of my customers at The Bulldog (which also is close to the campus) are under 21. That's not too bad," he said. "But close to 40 percent at Shanahan's are under 21. That's a lot of business."

So what happens when a significant portion of a business customer-base is jeopardized.

Kris Callen, executive manager at Poet's Restaurant and Bar (not a USL-area establishment), said some of the McKinley Street bars may lose so much business that they would have to close.

"In Mississippi, where the drinking age has been 21 for years, there were only three campus bars that served all of Ole Miss (the University of Mississippi in Oxford)," Callen said. "There just aren't as many customers because of the drinking age. I think that could happen here. Any of the Strip clubs that are borderline might not make it."

Troy Chatelain, a bartender at Nite Caps, agrees that there will be an impact on McKinley Street bars, but not to the point where some will have to close down.

"I think it may be a little rough at first, but things will work out," he said.

Like most other USL-area bars contacted by The Advertiser, Nite Caps most likely will still allow anyone over 18 in and use some sort of a marking system to separate the "drinking" customers from the "non-drinking" customers, Chatelain said. Some Strip club owners said cover charges will be higher for those under 21 to compensate for their loss of business.

"You're not going to make a whole lot of money selling Coke," Chatelain said.

Whether or not the bars will still be able to attract the 18- to 29-year-olds even though they can't drink remains to be seen.

"There will probably be a lot more people hanging out outside for a while," Chatelain said. "And then the police will tell them to go inside and they'll be like, 'What can I do inside that I can't do out here cheaper?'"

If the under-21 crowd balks at paying a cover charge to go into places where they can't drink, McKinley Street bars will either have to deal without the extra business or try to start attracting an older crowd.

"We may regain some of the older customers we lost when we started getting such a young crowd," Chatelain said.

Are there any other effects of the new law? Both Chatelain and Wilkerson suggested the use of illegal drugs could increase.

"Let's face it, college kids like to get (messed) up," Wilkerson said. "I can see those kids who can't drink going outside and..."
Executive manager at New: Law

“I think it may be a little rough at first, wherever and using drugs instead.”

Col. Paul Fontenot, commander of Louisiana State Police, said he does not see the connection between a stricter drinking law and increased drug use. He said closing the loophole that has existed in Louisiana’s drinking law for years also will save lives.

“There have been far too many fatal drunk-driving accidents involving people under 21,” Fontenot said. “This goes a long way toward resolving that.”

But Chatelain and others wondered if it might have the opposite effect in Lafayette.

“Kids are going to drink, it’s just a matter of where and how,” Chatelain said. “The Strip is within walking distance of USL. Are some of these students going to get in a car now and go find a new place to drink?”

Most of the club operators contacted by the newspaper were against the new drinking law. Maccos was even passing around a petition asking that the law be changed back.

But the fact remains, the law will go into effect Aug. 15. And, like it or not, Col. Fontenot said, it will be enforced.

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