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Officials discuss role of bistros in city

Written by

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How to tweak success?

More and more, that's the question behind the bistro story in Birmingham. The City Commission and Planning Board held a joint study session Monday to review the ordinance, with members of [the restaurant](#) and retail community showing up to offer their opinions. The big issue of the night was whether [bistros](#) are chewing up too much of the existing marketplace in Birmingham, or whether they're helping to grow the so-called pie.

"Let's be careful with trying to fix something that works," Mayor Gordon Rinschler said. "If it's growing the whole pie, everyone wins."

The city has approved a dozen bistro applications since the ordinance was adopted in 2007 — with all but two of them in the Central Business District. The ordinance allows bistro operators to obtain a liquor license, if certain conditions are met regarding seating, hours, [entertainment](#) and outdoor dining. Everyone agrees the streets of Birmingham are much livelier from all the activity, in

particular because of the outdoor dining platforms that are set up along the curbs through spring, summer and fall.

But retailers are cautious about adding too many bistros, saying they take up valuable storefront space — albeit space that was vacant — and question whether more diners translate into more shoppers.

"That's my concern," said Cheryl Daskas, co-owner of Tender at 271 W. Maple. "There has to be a balance."

Norm LePage, owner of the Big Rock Chophouse at 245 S. Eton Street, said there's no doubt his share of the pie has shrunk since 2007. He also noted several places are holding parties for 100 or more people, even though bistros are only allowed to seat 65 indoor customers, cutting into his banquet hall business.

LePage and Sameer Eid, owner of the Phoenicia [Restaurant](#) at 588 S. Old Woodward, both want the city to provide statistics on the total volume of alcohol and

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food sales in Birmingham before the bistro ordinance was adopted in 2007, and how much it's changed since the ordinance went into effect.

Resident Alice Thimm questions whether all of Birmingham is becoming one giant entertainment district. She wants city officials to pay more attention to retailers and the bedroom community.

"We have an identity in Birmingham," she told the two boards. "I'd like to see it enhanced, not necessarily changed."

The ordinance allows the commission to approve up to two bistros per year. Several board members said they would like to set an annual deadline so that all bistro applications in any given year can be reviewed at the same time. Right now, they're being approved on a first-come, first-served basis.

"If we're going to find the best and the brightest, there is some logic to analyzing the whole group at once to find the best-suited concept," Commissioner Mark Nickita said.

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But even that idea has its challenges. Commissioner Stuart Sherman, for example, noted most restaurant projects start out by securing a location. He questions whether that's possible if a bistro application has to undergo several rounds of review that could take months to complete.

Another challenge is to spread out the pie and encourage the opening of new bistros in the Rail District along Eton, the Triangle District between Maple, Adams and Lincoln, and the re-emerging Gallery District along North Old Woodward.

Commissioner George Dilgard suggested the easiest way to accomplish that goal is by establishing a moratorium on opening new bistros downtown over the next two years.

Planning Board members Bert Koseck and Scott Clein cautioned about making the review so competitive that only applicants with deep pockets will survive the process. That in turn could result in higher menu prices and less variety.

"Let's be careful that we don't end up with a bunch of bistros serving \$38 steaks," Koseck said.

Because the meeting was a study session, no action took place. But the two boards did agree they want an updated market

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study to determine the best areas to grow commercially in Birmingham. They also want to pursue the idea of setting up some type of deadline to allow for the review of multiple applications at one time.

Commissioner Scott Moore also suggested holding a "landlord summit" that would involve the various property owners throughout downtown and other parts of Birmingham.

"It's in their best interest to have a balance," he said. "At some point they want to be part of the discussion because it's in their self-interest."

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Zoom

City Commissioner Mark Nickita talks about the benefits bistros have brought to Birmingham. Behind him are Steve Quintal of Central Park Properties (left) and fellow Commissioner Stuart Sherman. / photos by David Bloom

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