

Viewpoints

Be careful what you wish for

If headlines are any indication, the most important law passed during the recent legislative session was the change in Utah's liquor laws. The day after the legislation passed, the front page of the Standard-Examiner proclaimed, "Lawmakers agree to dump private club system for bars." The Salt Lake Tribune wrote, "Huntsman and lawmakers strike a historic deal on Utah's alcohol laws."

On the same day, Obama's renewal of stem cell research and the condition of the financial markets were deemed to be less newsworthy. I don't quite understand why a change in liquor laws qualifies as Page One news. I also believe that Utah may come to regret the change.

I know this viewpoint contradicts most news reports. My reservations are neither because I am a teetotaler nor because I think Utah should go to great lengths to restrict alcohol consumption. I am concerned that the liberalization of Utah's liquor laws may not be good for locally owned restaurants and bars.

Over the past 20 years, Ogden has seen the end of small neighborhood groceries, shops and hardware stores. When I first moved to the city, two grocery stores were within a few blocks of my home.

A hardware store was within a five-minute drive. I could even buy a suit and tie in downtown Ogden. Now, the closest grocery is more than two miles from my home and other retailers are even farther away.

For the most part, this doesn't have anything to do with Ogden's economy or policies. The ascendance of large, national retailers led to the demise of many smaller, regionally owned businesses. You would see a similar pattern in almost any city in the nation. If you have friends or relatives in other states, chances are that they buy their milk, paint, lumber and shoes from exactly the same company that you do.

One exception to this pattern is found in Ogden's restaurants and bars. Without a doubt, there are more fine restaurants in Ogden than any time in the past. Most of these are locally owned. The best examples are found in the dozens of locally owned restaurants and bars that line 25th Street.

There are numerous reasons why Ogden's locally owned restaurants and bars have flourished. The city's efforts to revive downtown Ogden are important. The entrepreneurial acumen of local restaurateurs can't be overlooked. Also, in an odd way, Utah's quirky liquor laws

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

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Commentary

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have helped.

Utah's liquor laws were so complex than many national franchises avoided the Utah market. Several national restaurant chains have openly stated that fact. Local entrepreneurs devoted the time and effort to negotiate the complex regulatory system. Many nationwide restaurants were simply unwilling to undertake the task.

Northern Utah has several locally owned sports bars, but Ogden has never had a Hooters franchise. I don't think that is bad. Ogden has Roosters Brewing, but not a Beef 'O' Brady's, a national pub franchise operating in over 250 locations.

Dozens of national sports bars, microbreweries, wine bars and pubs have avoided Northern Utah. In this environment, Roosters, the Wine Cellar, the City Club, Brewski's and dozens of other local businesses were able to succeed.

This may soon change. The loosening of Utah's liquor laws could spur an influx of national franchises to compete aggressively with locally owned businesses.

Proponents of loosening Utah's liquor laws believe that it will make Utah like the rest of the country. In some ways this is good. Conventioneering Shriners won't be intimidated when they order a drink. In other ways, it is bad.

When I was in junior high school my hometown got its first McDonald's franchise. All the kids thought it was great. Now we were just like thousands of other cities. In hindsight, being just like a thousand other cities isn't as great as we thought.

Loosening Utah's liquor laws will make Utah more akin to other states. Ogden moves a little closer to being Des Moines, Iowa, with mountains.

Is this a desirable aspiration? In coming years, we may look back with fond memories of a time when Utah was different.