

Not all residents enjoy downtown Norfolk's rebirth

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NORFOLK – Some of the worst traffic jams both on the streets and sidewalks of downtown occur at 2 a.m. Throngs of late-night partiers amble – or stumble – out of clubs. Horns blare. Obscenities fly.

Ten years ago, as they plotted downtown's rebirth, city leaders wanted a vibrant area with offices, stores, homes, restaurants and entertainment spots. They got it.

Downtown no longer slumbers. But above those noisy clubs, a growing legion of downtown residents aren't slumbering, either.

Downtown's new challenge is making all the activities compatible.

Emilio Sousa moved to a Granby Street loft 2-1/2 years ago because he liked the lively atmosphere. Now, after several nightclubs opened on his block, he's considering moving.

"When the clubs close and send people in the street at the same time, it can get a little rowdy," he said. "Many are intoxicated and linger and hang in the streets another hour or so, making noise and cussing at each other. It's not the most desirable situation in front of your home."

City Councilman Anthony L. Burfoot agrees: "When people buy condos at price points of \$300,000 up to \$2 million, they don't want to see young people at their door throwing up."

About 3,900 people now live downtown, and with more construction under way, that number is likely to near 5,000 soon.

In the past seven years, dining, entertainment and theater sales in the Granby business district have increased nearly four fold, to about \$45 million in 2005, according to city economic reports.

The number of nightclubs is hard to estimate because, technically, all establishments that serve alcohol are restaurants. Some, however, get much livelier late at night, with live entertainment and other additions.

With a two-year grant from the Responsible Hospitality Institute, the Downtown Norfolk Council, a non profit business association, is trying to help.

"The late-night economy really adds to the vitality of downtown Norfolk," said Cathy Coleman, the council's president. "Our goal is for everyone to succeed, and everyone has a responsibility in that – the nightclub owners, the developers, the residential property owners. Across the board, expectations need to be set and understood."

Through this effort, taxi stands recently were established downtown to clear crowds more quickly and safely at night. Downtown garages now allow those who park overnight to pay a reduced fee upon showing a cab receipt.

City police and code officials also have downtown nightclubs under scrutiny.

One Granby Street club, Station 2, shut down earlier this year in part because its live music bothered neighbors and violated noise standards. No sound barriers were in place to prevent excessive noise because club managers and the landlord were fighting over who was responsible for installing them. They're now in court over the matter.

Another club, Fahrenheit, has been cited several times this year because patrons were dancing, which isn't allowed under its city permit.

Fahrenheit's lawyer said some of the city's regulations on nightclubs are draconian.

"When you play music, it causes people to spontaneously begin to dance," said attorney Kevin Martingayle. "We're not responsible for people who felt moved to move to the music."

A plea agreement allows the charges to be dropped if the club has no further violations.

Another venue, Granby Theater/Premiere, has been cited for several violations, including overcrowding. Under an agreement with the city, the violations will be dismissed next year if there are no further infractions.

Owner Bobby Wright asked the city to boost its permitted capacity and allow the venue to stay open an hour later, serving only food. He was denied.

Wright said he was hoping to help his business and also diffuse some of the noise at 2 a.m. by staggering closing hours.

"Government needs to be careful not to micromanage businesses to the point that businesses would rather operate elsewhere," he said.

For the most part, however, city officials say they have few problems with downtown restaurants and entertainment venues.

Over the past two years, city records show that restaurants and nightclubs downtown received criminal citations on about 20 occasions, mostly for overcrowding but also for dancing, changing floor plans or obstructing exits, hallways or sidewalks.

"We're trying to manage its character," said City Attorney Bernard A. Pishko, adding that the city does not want Granby Street to become as raucous as the Virginia Beach resort strip known as "the block."

Police Lt. Ed Ryan said officers are trained in "entertainment policing" and work closely with business owners on security issues.

"They have just as much to lose as we do" if something goes wrong, he said.

Wright, who lives in condos he developed at 500 Granby St., acknowledges that he's been awakened at night.

"Am I happy about that? Not really," he said. "But it's the reason I'm here. I'm here for that lifestyle."

Coleman said the downtown council is pushing the real estate industry to make sure potential residents have realistic expectations of downtown living.

"Some move downtown because of the vitality," she said, "but the reality of being in an urban environment when the bars let out at 2 a.m. is not what they expected."

Coleman said some cities set soundproofing standards and require that bedrooms be built in the back of the units, off the main thoroughfare.

"Our goal is to put the balance in place so residents feel good about where they're living and restaurants and night clubs can succeed," she said.

Meanwhile, development continues to explode, with a 20-story office tower for Dominion Enterprises opening soon. Several hundred more residential units now are under construction.

Mayor Paul Fraim said he thinks Granby might be reaching its saturation point for nightclubs.

He takes an optimistic view of downtown's latest challenge.

"It's a good problem to have," he said. "There was a time when no one would want to be here."

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