

COVER STORY

/BY: Carlos Moncada

LARGO MOVES CLOSER TO ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT WITH OUTDOOR DRINKING

"I AM SUPER EXCITED ABOUT THIS FINALLY COMING TO FRUITION, I CAN SEE THE LIGHT. I AM SO READY FOR IT."

-COMMISSIONER DONNA HOLCK

THE COMMISSION VOTED 7-0 TO APPROVE ON FIRST READING AN ORDINANCE CREATING THE WEST BAY DRIVE DOWNTOWN ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT

LARGO — Picture a bustling downtown where people come together to sip alcohol and stroll around as they patronize shops and restaurants, sway to live music or simply chill out and take in a fabulous sunset.

City leaders have now moved a step closer toward making that vision a reality.

The city commission on Feb. 18 gave initial approval to creating a long-awaited downtown entertainment district, allowing people to “sip and stroll” while legally carrying open containers of alcoholic beverages in defined public areas along West Bay Drive.

The commission voted 7-0 to approve on first reading an ordinance creating the West Bay Drive Downtown Entertainment District, which would provide a morning-through-night open-air venue for shopping, dining and live performances.

“I am super excited about this finally coming to fruition,” Commissioner Donna Holck said. “I can see the light. I am so ready for it.”



An entertainment district, they said, also would help bring more retailers, restaurants and housing to downtown — where an \$81 million mixed-use project known as Horizon West Bay, which will include a new City Hall, is set for completion later this year.

Establishing an entertainment district would build on the city’s efforts to bring a vibrant, walkable “live, work and play” environment to the urban core. Such districts can be found all around Florida and beyond, including places like Crystal River, Mount Dora and St. Cloud.

The proposed ordinance would allow open-container carry from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday

through Wednesday, and 8 a.m. to midnight Thursday through Saturday. The extended hours also would apply to legal holidays and special events.

Patrons would be required to buy alcoholic

Debbie Kennedy, a senior pastor at Liberty Worship Center, located just outside the proposed district, told commissioners she was worried about alcohol-related problems including

The chief did note, however, that crowd sizes might pose logistical problems.

“If there’s a lot of people every single night, then there’s going to be staffing concerns for me,” he said. “But it’s something we can deal with.”

Mayor Woody Brown acknowledged that creating an entertainment district “comes with some challenges.” However, he said the majority of people he’s spoken with support the idea of bringing more vibrancy and a sense of place to downtown.

“The folks I’ve talked to in the downtown — I live right down there too — they’re really excited,” the mayor said. “The people I know in the [new] townhomes are excited. They tell me things like, ‘This is why we bought here.’ And they love the fact that there’s going to be things they can walk to. I’m excited as well.”

Craig Murtha, one of two residents who spoke in favor of the district, said he knows many people who drive from Largo to places like St. Petersburg, Dunedin or Safety Harbor to drink.

“They’re sort of taking a risk driving all the way home,” said Murtha, a nondrinker. “So this is a good thing that we’re going to have a place

Image Courtesy City of Largo



beverages from bars, restaurants and breweries within the district that are licensed to sell the drinks. They would be allowed to take their drinks off the premises and consume them on city streets, in outdoor plazas and parks and other designated areas within the district.

The city manager, John Curp, would have authority to create the open alcohol zones, which would be exempt from state prohibitions against drinking in public places. Special branded drinking cups would hold no more than 16 ounces, and a person would be limited to buying no more than two drinks at a time. Outside drinks would be prohibited. Nor could you take a drink purchased at one bar into another.

The proposed district boundaries would run from 1st Avenue NW to the north, Clearwater-Largo Road to the west, Alt. Highway 19 to the east and 1st Avenue SW to the south.

City planners will put together an operating plan for the district between now and when the ordinance comes up for a second and final vote and public hearing, tentatively set for July 15.

Officials said while the majority of feedback from their public engagements has been positive, some have raised concerns about traffic, parking, noise and trash.

public urination, littering and trespassing.

“What’s going to stop them from coming to our property if they’re wandering around the area and they’re drinking and things get out of control?” she asked. “That’s a lot to police.”



Image Courtesy DowntownLargo.com

Police Chief Mike Loux said such issues should be addressed by the proposed rules for the district, such as the two-drink purchase limit and noise decibel limits. Also, signs and other markings would let people know where the boundaries of the open-container zones lie so they do not stray beyond them.

where people can go out and enjoy themselves and maybe walk home, especially after we have more housing built in downtown. It’s just a much better idea to have our own entertainment district.”