

WILL PUBLIC DRINKING HELP REVIVE DOWNTOWN LARGO?

CITY LEADERS ARE BETTING A NEW ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT WILL BOOST BUSINESS, WALKABILITY AND NIGHTLIFE.

/BY: **Carlos Moncada**

LARGO—Will promoting public drinking help bring more foot traffic, vibrancy and commerce to downtown? Or will it create unintended challenges such as crime, litter, disorder and other alcohol-related problems?

City leaders are betting the former will outweigh the latter.

The Largo City Commission on June 2 voted 7-0 to create the West Bay Drive Downtown Entertainment District, allowing patrons to legally carry alcoholic beverages in designated public areas as they



Largo City Manager John Curp is confident the district will be “a big plus” for downtown. Photo from City of Largo.

move between restaurants, bars, shops and entertainment venues in the city’s urban core.

Supporters see the entertainment district as a key piece of Largo’s ongoing effort to transform its once-sleepy downtown into a dynamic destination where people can live, work and play. Some critics, though, worry it could create new public safety and quality-of-life issues.

The district will be anchored by Horizon West Bay, Largo’s signature redevelopment project that opened last month. The \$85 million mixed-use development includes a new city hall, retail space, community gathering areas and a public parking garage designed to serve as the centerpiece of a revitalized downtown.

City Manager John Curp said he is confident the district will be “a big plus” for downtown and that Horizon West Bay will help anchor activity in the area.

The “sip and stroll” district, a popular

economic development tool among a growing number of cities in Florida and beyond, is designed to attract both visitors and locals and encourage them to spend more time — and money — downtown.

Under the approved ordinance, patrons can purchase beer, wine or other alcoholic beverages from a participating establishment and carry them within designated open-container zones in the district. Outside alcohol is prohibited, and customers may not take a drink purchased at one establishment into another bar or restaurant.

Drinking hours will run from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday and from 8 a.m. to midnight Thursday through Saturday and on legal holidays. Extended hours may be approved for city-sponsored events and special occasions.

“I’m wholeheartedly in support of this district and I’m very excited about it,” Vice Mayor Chris Johnson said, although he questioned allowing outdoor drinking until midnight on Thursdays.

Some commissioners also questioned whether alcohol service should begin as early as 8 a.m.

“Eight in the morning is kind of an interesting choice,” Commissioner Mike DiBrizzi said. “I think that’s way too early. I think the hours are an issue.”

Mayor Woody Brown noted that start time would accommodate patrons who want a mimosa.

The district generally encompasses downtown Largo, bounded by First Avenue Northwest to the north, Clearwater-Largo Road to the west, Alt. U.S. 19 to the east and First Avenue Southwest to the south, with an additional area extending south of West Bay Drive.

The ordinance, which received initial approval in February 2025, includes numerous restrictions aimed at preventing problems from spilling over into adjoining neighborhoods.

Yet DiBrizzi, who said he was “generally in favor” of the district, questioned the lack of a formal safety plan and why the measure took more than a year to return for final approval.

“After almost a year and a half of silence, it’s now on the agenda for a vote,” he said. “I don’t think this was handled in the best way, given the time period in between.”



The city will phase in the “wet zones” that will allow open alcohol consumption in public spaces. Map from City of Largo.

The ordinance requires alcoholic beverages to be served in city-approved containers holding no more than 16 ounces. Patrons may possess no more than two drinks at a time and may not carry beverages outside the open-alcohol zones.

The district currently includes three participating businesses, all of which must register with the city and post maps showing district boundaries.

Violations of the city’s open-container regulations are punishable by fines of up to \$500, up to 60 days in jail, or both. The city manager has authority to establish, modify or revoke open-alcohol zones and adopt additional operating rules for the district.

The ordinance also creates special noise standards for the district.

Outdoor music and entertainment will be permitted until 11 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday and until midnight Thursday through Saturday and on legal holidays. Sound levels generally may not exceed 75 decibels when measured at the nearest residential property line, although live performances may be allowed up to 95 decibels during permitted hours.

While city staff said public feedback has been mostly positive, some residents and business owners have voiced concerns about noise, traffic, parking, litter, trespassing and public intoxication.

Curp said the ordinance “gives the administration flexibility to move quickly” to address such issues.

He said existing police resources should be adequate to manage activity within the district.

“I have talked with the chief, and I think he’s comfortable that our resources are more than capable of handling events,” Curp said. “We have special events all the time and we deal with large crowds. And we’ll know those events are coming. We won’t have spontaneous parties where people are tumbling into West Bay Drive.”

Two residents seeking seats on the city commission in November weighed in during the public comment portion of the meeting.

Greg Gardner argued that Horizon West Bay is essentially a large government complex rather than a true downtown destination, contending that Largo lacks the community character and homegrown business environment found in places such as Dune-din.

“You can put on a gimmick. I’m not buying it. I’m not drinking the Kool-Aid,” he said. “Largo is not a destination place. Sorry, that’s the truth and that’s how a lot of people see it.”

Matt Faustini, who chairs the city’s planning board, took the opposite view. Faustini said staff needs greater flexibility to attract tenants to Horizon West Bay as the city competes with privately owned commercial space nearby.

“Right now, we’re sitting at a 60% to 70% non-occupancy rate in this building, and we have a \$3.5 million annual bond payment to cover,” he said. “So we’ve got to make this work.”

Commissioner Donna Holck said she believes the city is ready.

“This has been a long time coming,” Holck said. “And I know we can make this work. I know our citizens are behind it, and I can’t wait to get this whole thing rolling.”

