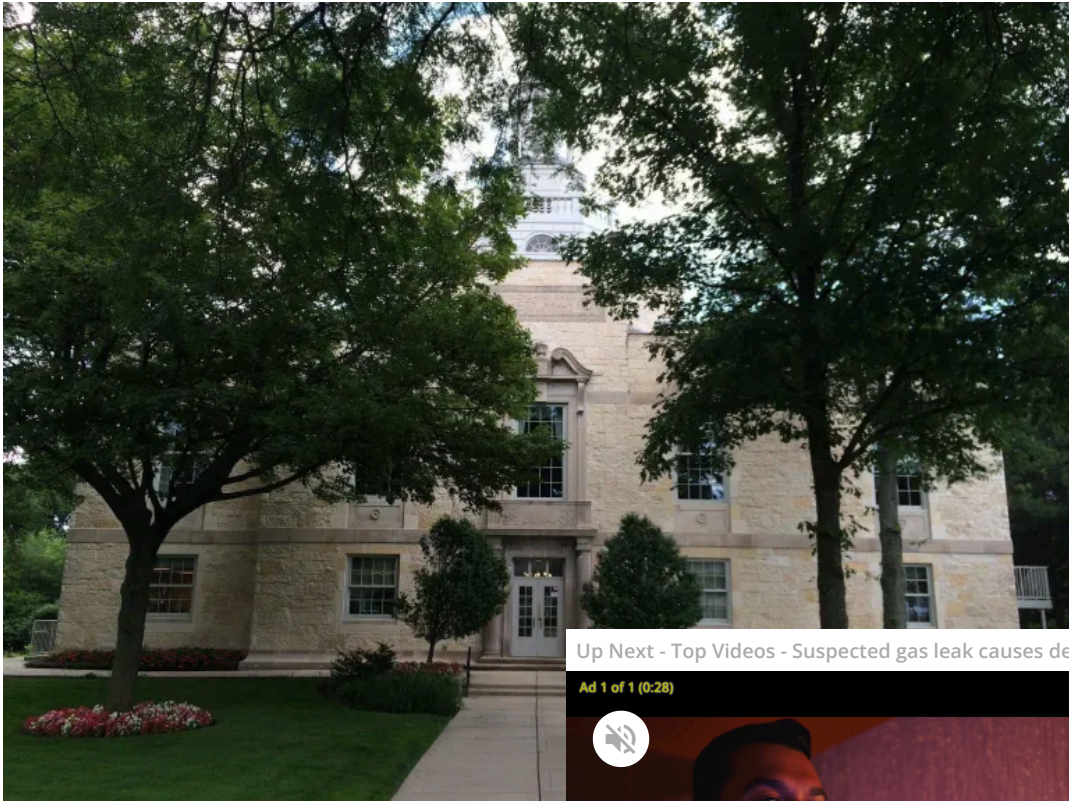


LAKE COUNTY NEWS-SUN

Highland Park restaurant, business owners say elected officials should be allowed to hold liquor licenses; 'Our voices are being muffled'



Restaurant and business owners in Highland Park read an open letter to the City Council Monday at City Hall, pictured above, asking the council to allow them to be issued a liquor license.



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A discussion over electoral representation is center-stage in Highland Park after nearly 30 restaurant and business owners urged Mayor Nancy Rotering and the City Council to change the city code which prohibits issuing liquor licenses to elected officials, saying the law infringes on restaurant owners' right to hold elected office.

The debate around the Prohibition-era law began when city staff and the mayor discovered the code after concerns were brought forward over Councilman Jeff Hoobler's involvement in discussions on the city's liquor code.

Hoobler, who was elected in 2023, is also the co-owner of Ravinia Brewing Company in Highland Park – a fact that has been well-known since his campaign for office. Just a couple of months ago, Hoobler's renewed liquor license was approved by Rotering, who serves as the city's liquor control commissioner.

After the discrepancy was discovered in February, a motion was made to amend the code at the following council meeting. However, the amendment failed on a tie vote after Hoobler recused himself, with three opposition votes from council members Kim Stone, Anthony Blumberg and Rotering.

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City Manager Ghida Neukirch said the council and the Liquor Control Board will hold a hearing to consider revocation of the license.

However, if the local craft pub reapplies for a license renewal, it would not be able to issue a license to the brewery if its owners are not on the list, she said.

Now, the restaurant and business owners of Highland Park are presenting their case to the council, arguing that holding a liquor license should be a community matter for the Council and voting on community matters.



Dozens of people signed the letter, along with restaurants such as Abigail's American Bistro, Bluegrass, Cafe Dacha, Norton's Restaurant and others.

"Our voices are being muffled," said Iris Dhalawong, owner of Ruby of Siam, a Thai restaurant in downtown Highland Park, who read the letter aloud to the council Monday night.

Neukirch said council members and city staff have heard from constituents who support the liquor license code as it is written.

Since the community and council are divided, the local chapter of the League of Women Voters offered to research the law's history and what other cities have done in regard to amending the code.

"No recommendation would come out of this study," said Jean Sogin, who spoke on behalf of the League's leadership team at Monday's meeting. "It's our hope that a nonpartisan league study on this issue would give everyone a common set of facts."

Neukirch said the city greatly appreciates the League of Women Voters' offer, but has not yet made a decision on whether the study is needed. In February, the city did a comprehensive study on how surrounding municipalities have handled the liquor licensing law.

'The fabric of Highland Park'

More than just spots to gather and eat, the letter said, restaurants in Highland Park are forums for debate and discussion, the birthplace of ideas and they attract new visitors and residents.

Restaurant owners also employ people from all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds and beliefs, the letter said.

"Our establishments are places where people add their voices to the fabric of Highland Park," the letter said. "We uniquely represent the people of Highland Park precisely because we instantly have our fingers on the pulse of so many things that matter in our town."

As someone who wants to be more involved in public service with a long-term goal of running for office, Dhalawong said he often finds himself as a spokesperson or liaison between his communities and the Highland Park City Council.

"People don't feel like there's a way or a forum to get their voices heard," Dhalawong said.

The restaurants' letter said the liquor license law is inconsistent with the state's representation rights to real estate developers and owners of businesses, but not business owners with liquor licenses. [Up Next - Top Videos - Suspected gas leak causes deadly blast ...](#) [Ad 1 of 1 \(0:20\)](#) X

Rotering did not respond to the content of the letter during the meeting, but the restaurant group for sharing their opinion.

After Prohibition ended in 1934, Illinois state law prohibited restaurants from being eligible to receive liquor licenses. This law was later amended to allow Highland Park and other municipalities. X

In 2001, the state amended the clause to allow liquor licenses for cities with a population of 50,000 or fewer. In 2013, it was amended again for populations of 55,000 or less.



Since the state's amendment, municipalities in Illinois have changed their local laws, including at least eight cities near Highland Park, according to a 50-city study conducted by Highland Park's corporation counsel.

Restaurant owners in Highland Park want to be involved in city decisions and believe their voices and input hold value, according to the letter.

Highland Park is working on initiatives to support and grow current businesses, while helping attract new ones, as part of the city's business development plan, Neukirch said.

On Monday, the council provided preliminary support for a financial incentive initiative for food and beverage establishments at its Committee of the Whole meeting. Restaurants would need to meet certain criteria to qualify for a 50/50 cost-share loan or grant from the city.

Neukirch said the city has a meeting with restaurant owners scheduled for April 17 to discuss incentives in general, special events, promotions and other information about the city's capital plan before a full-fledged initiative is presented to the City Council in May.

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