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Bars welcome police scrutiny; Investigative team new reality of nightclubs ownership

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: Anne-Marie Jackson, the Journal / Matt Fisher, from the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, checks IDs at Lucky 13 Dance Pub.

Photo: Anne-Marie Jackson, the Journal / Const. Chad Lowry stands outside Lucky 13 Dance Pub during a random ID check.

EDMONTON - Hector Castro flashes a smile when a team of investigators arrives unannounced at his Whyte Avenue nightclub. He shakes their hands, and ushers them past the line of short skirts and high heels snaking its way into the Lucky 13 Dance Pub.

As a police officer speaks with Castro in a back room, the rest of the city's public safety compliance team has begun an investigation into his business. They want to see his security cameras, his bouncers, his door management polices -- all of which will be studied and scrutinized by police.

This is the new reality of nightclub ownership.

"We're trying to stop the problems here before they start," Castro tells the officer, pointing out the 11 security guards and 14 active cameras in his nightclub. Footage of partygoers is stored for 21 days, he says, and all patrons have their driver's licences scanned upon entry.

On a typical Saturday night, the team will spend four hours sweeping through a half-dozen bars and nightclubs. The team includes a senior police officer, fire investigator, bylaw officer, and a liquor control board inspector. It is assisted by beat patrol officers who know the area.

In about 21 months, the team has shut down three bars for safety reasons, had a hand in temporarily closing two others, and compiled detailed records on hundreds of the more than 1,000 watering holes in the city. Most recently, it shut down the north-side Zocca's Pizzeria after police charged two staff members with drug-related offences.

Shutting down bars is not the goal of the team, says Sgt. Gary Godziuk, a former tactical squad officer who leads the team. The aim is to get rid of bar owners who don't follow the rules while teaching the rest how to reduce risks and run well-managed, safe establishments.

"We're not about causing pain. It's not about rejecting their licence, it's not about giving them tickets," Godziuk says. "We're raising the standards of all these bars. Then, the industry as a whole becomes more professional."

After the random visits -- which run year-round -- inspectors from the different agencies compile their data, creating a comprehensive snapshot of the

nightclub industry. Sharing the information also helps the team see how a small issue can spiral into a big problem.

At Lucky 13, the only issue that comes up during the summer inspection is a broken air conditioner.

Godziuk tells the owner the extreme heat can have an aggravating effect on club-goers, and lead to a higher potential for violence.

In fact, most of the concerns noted by the team aren't serious.

At a West Edmonton mall club, the liquor licence was in back room, and not displayed as required. A Whyte Avenue club boasted 26 security cameras but not a single waitress.

Further down the strip, a bylaw officer spots cigarette butts on the bar's balcony, a sign that there's been past violations of Alberta's public non-smoking policy. There are no security cameras installed, which bothers the team.

"We're not here about enforcement, we're here to help you," Godziuk tells the new manager, who just shakes his head.

The teams sets up a meeting between the owner and several beat patrol officers to help him work things out in the early stages of launching a new business.

The team has been making some inroads, especially in the inner city, according to a city report.

Police calls to the Mount Royal Hotel dropped 64 per cent after the owner implemented management plans supplied by the team, the report says.

"It's come at a cost, but then again there is a lot less violence," says Mount Royal's bar manager Denis Chartrand. One major change saw him stop selling off-sales of large liquor bottles -- losing about \$15,000 a month in revenue in the process -- to prevent unruly customers from smashing them on the sidewalk or using them as weapons.

"This bar and the neighbourhood has really cleaned up since then," he says.

The majority of other inner-city drinking establishments working with the team have also

shown a decrease in problems over the past year. The York Hotel dropped to 90 violations from 130 within 12 months, the report says.

Coun. Amarjeet Sohi says the team has saved the city thousands of dollars by reducing police calls to problem bars.

"I've heard too that, because of this team, the bar owners are more inclined to follow the rules," he says. "They know now that the different agencies are working as one team. They're sharing where the problem spots are."

About half of all businesses inspected by the team thus far have no outstanding issues. Only 16 per cent, or 170 licenced premises across Edmonton, have been placed in a high-risk category, requiring more frequent inspections.

The biggest problem for the team is the dense concentration of bars and nightclubs in specific streets. There are more than 2,500 licensed seats along two single blocks on Jasper Avenue.

Across downtown and Old Strathcona alone, the team has to monitor more than 100 bars and nightclubs that can serve more than 23,000 people every night.

At closing time, thousands spill onto the streets looking for cabs. It's a big concern for the nightclub industry as well, says Giselle Williams of the Oil City Hospitality Group, which runs five downtown bars.

The bar group has been working with the city and the team to encourage more taxi drivers to work at night. So far, it's still a work-in-progress.

The team's approach is attracting attention from other cities. Officials in high-growth Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie have contacted the compliance team about how to start similar operations.

"There are some operators that are in there temporarily, they think they can skirt public safety to put a dollar in their pocket," Godziuk says.

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A BRIEF HISTORY:

- January 2007: City council approves funding to create the first public safety compliance team to investigate bars and nightclubs.

- February 2007: Smok'n Joe's Roadhouse has its licence suspended for three months after the team links the bar to violence and poor management practices. Police calls tend to shoot up whenever the bars holds 49-cent highball promotions.

- April 2008: The late-night Y After-Hours Club is hit with restrictions from the team, preventing patrons from entering after 3 a.m. The club wins a small victory after appealing to a city committee that agrees to allow patrons to enter until 4 a.m.

- May 2008: The Windmill Restaurant and Bar is permanently closed after management refuses to adopt the team's recommendations for improved safety. The team points out the bar had 67 police calls in one year and constant complaints from neighbours.

- June 2008: Gingur Sky is closed for three days after two violent incidents, including a serious stabbing.

- July 2008: Surveillance cameras are introduced on Jasper Avenue, pointed at the highest concentration of downtown bars along 107th to 109th Street.

- September 2008: Zocca's Pizzeria is shut down by the city upon the team's recommendation after the owner is charged with several drug-related offences. Zocca's has hired a lawyer to appeal the decision.