

Alberta Liquor Store Association rebuttal to Edmonton Journal Editorial, January 19th, 2018  
By Ivonne Martinez

The Edmonton Journal believes Edmonton's liquor store proximity bylaw is "arbitrary" and "over-reaching." It declared so in a Jan. 19 editorial, in which is also called for city council to scrap the bylaw, which stipulates no liquor store can operate within a 500-metre radius of another.

Let's start with what is patently untrue. The 500-metre limit is not "arbitrary."

The Alberta Liquor Store Association worked with the city and other stakeholders to bring in the law because selling alcohol is more than just a function of the free market. It's a responsibility to public safety.

During our deliberations leading up to passing the bylaw, an Edmonton Police Service study concluded that there is "a significant positive correlation on the number of crime occurrences and the number of liquor stores in areas where the distance between liquor stores is less than 379 meters on average" and an increase in "the number of dispatched calls or service...where the distance between liquor stores is less than 276 meters away."

Put another way: The closer together liquor stores are – especially inside 500 meters - the higher the likelihood of criminal activity. Hard evidence supports this.

Let's move on to "over-reach." The Journal believes council has gone to too far in prescribing limits on liquor store density, saying the bylaw has "stifled competition." This is somewhat amusing, as there three times as many liquor stores in Edmonton as there are Tim Hortons locations. Availability is hardly lacking.

Besides, alcohol isn't milk or eggs or laundry detergent. It's a controlled substance for a reason. Community safety is really what's at stake here. While alcoholic beverages are wonderful when handled responsibly, there is no denying they carry the potential for harm.

As Alberta Health Services noted in a 2016 report, a high liquor store density "could be a legitimate health concern and calls to attention the importance of policy approaches that limit the number of alcohol licenses and geographic density of outlets in communities."

The same report also states, "the impact of outlet density on high-risk drinking among younger drinkers is especially pronounced," noting a separate study that linked higher densities to risky adolescent drinking in urban areas.

Readers should know it was expert input like this that compelled council to create the distance bylaw in the first place before deciding whether or not it constitutes the "over-reach" the Journal argues.

The Journal also wrongly frames the issue in terms of ethics. Granting an exemption to the 500-metre rule would be an act of corporate pandering that could pose ethical problems for city council given who is seeking the exemption.

This is immaterial. The bylaw allows for any would-be operator to apply for an exemption, which means council's only job is to judge each application on its merits.

The only lens through which council should view their decision is the safety and wellbeing of the people they represent.

If council takes that view, the decision should be quite easy.