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Nightlife bill advances to state Assembly

By Trisha Thadani

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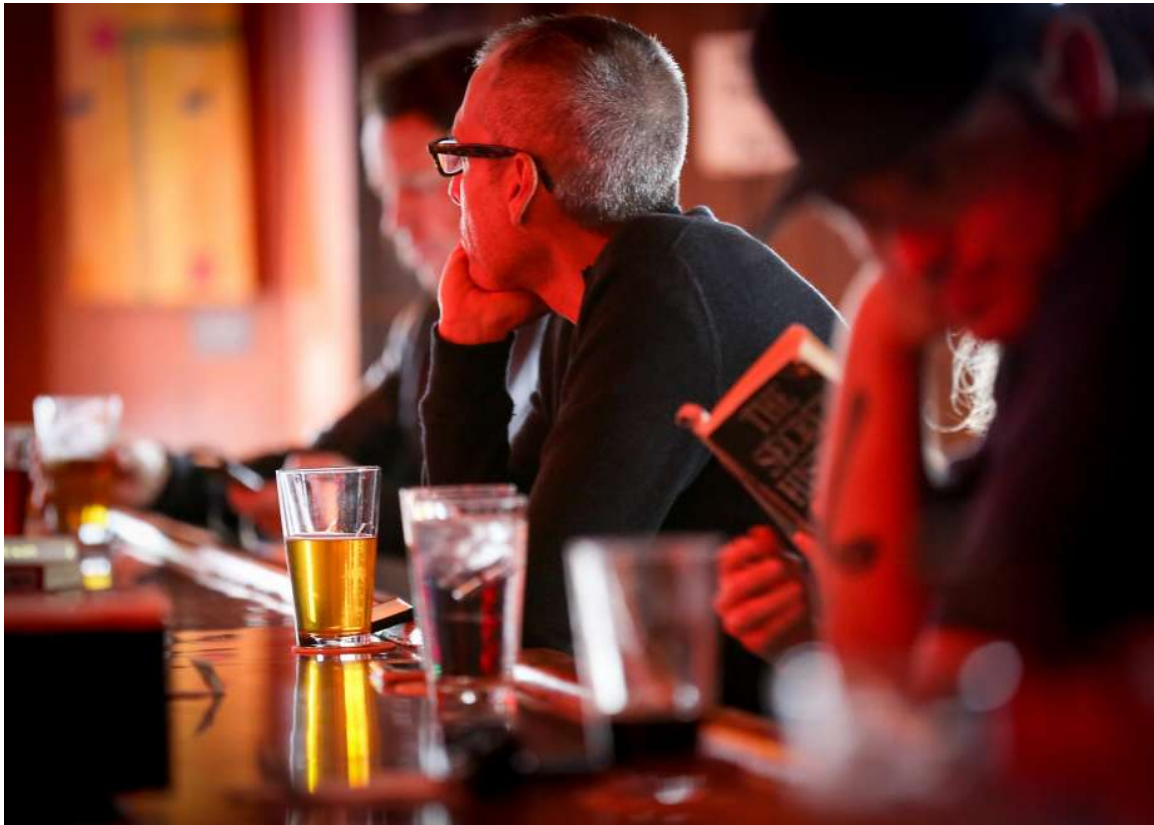


Photo: Amy Osborne, Special To The Chronicle

The bar top is lined with pints during happy hour at The Page in San Francisco in August. A bill headed to the state Assembly could legalize later opening hours for bars in California.

The state Senate approved a bill that would allow bars to stay open until 4 a.m. Wednesday, bringing San Francisco and other California cities one step closer to a later last call.

The bill, which state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, [introduced in February](#), would allow communities to decide if local bars can serve alcohol past the current 2 a.m. cutoff. It will now move to the state Assembly for a review and vote — one of the last steps for the bill before it hits the governor's desk.

This is the furthest a call to extend nightlife hours has made it in the legislature since Prohibition. The Let Our Communities Adjust Late Night, or LOCAL Act, is nearly identical to two bills proposed by Wiener's predecessor, Mark Leno, D-San Francisco. Leno's most recent attempt was in 2013, but that bill failed to get enough support in committee and was withdrawn.

So why the momentum this time around?

Wiener attributes the bipartisan support to several reasons: new legislators, a larger population of young people in cities like San Francisco who would take advantage of the later hours and increased transportation options.

Uber and Lyft have soared in popularity since 2013. Both ride-hailing companies are alternatives for people looking to get home late at night after public transit lines stop running or reduce service.

“When I first came in the mid 1990s, getting a cab at 2 a.m. was almost impossible, and I knew a lot of people that drove — but today I don’t know anyone who drives when they go out,” Wiener said.

Jim Lazarus, senior vice president of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, which supports this bill, said the advent of Uber and Lyft should be factored into the legislature’s decision to extend bar hours.

“We are seeing a huge change in how people get around,” he said. “You’re not waiting for some infrequent owl service bus, and there’s a reasonably priced alternative vehicle service from virtually every part of the city.”

Supporters of the bill say it will stimulate the state’s economy as cities that adopt later hours become more attractive to tourists.

Cities with late-night service hours beyond 2 a.m. include Chicago, Washington, New York City, Buffalo, Las Vegas, Louisville, Atlanta, Miami Beach, New Orleans and Atlanta.

Some bars in San Francisco are already allowed to stay open until 5 a.m. — but they must cease serving alcohol at 2 a.m. Jamie Zawinski, owner of DNA Lounge, a club that has [experienced financial hardship](#) in recent months, said being able to extend the hours it can sell alcohol would be a boon for his business.

Shawn Refoua, who has trained thousands of bartenders in San Francisco through California Academy of Bartending and Mixology, said nearly every “hardworking bartender” he knows would appreciate the extra money from working the additional hours.

But, he said, those later hours could come with its downfalls: “It’s going to mess with the violence. More rowdiness, people drinking longer ... and you’re going to get a lot of people staying out until 4 a.m. and then waiting for BART to open up again.”

Opponents say the bill prioritizes alcohol revenue over public safety.

“Times have changed, and people are just not as concerned about public health and safety as they were in 2013,” said Michael Scippa, director of public affairs for Alcohol Justice. “We have become a little more immune and numb.”

Both the California Police Chiefs Association and the California State Sheriffs’ Association strongly opposed Leno’s bill in 2013, but declined to comment on Wiener’s bill.

But Bill Brown, president of the Sheriffs’ Association, said he would be “hard pressed” to see a benefit to keeping bars open later.

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