

CITY HAS PAID SCANT ATTENTION TO STRIP CLUBS - Columbus Dispatch, The (OH) - August 20, 2001 - page 01A

August 20, 2001 | Columbus Dispatch, The (OH) | Mark Ferenchik and Jim Weiker Dispatch Staff Reporters | Page 01A

It's a little after midnight at Danny and Dave's Millennium Fox Show Bar on Greenlawn Avenue, where the night is still young.

About 15 men sit around the smoky, dimly lit bar as six or seven women in bikinis and filmy dresses move from customer to customer, stopping briefly to flirt with each one.

A thin, blonde woman climbs onto a small stage behind the bar. To a thumping, hip-hop beat, she removes her see-through blouse to reveal a G-string and bikini top.

She glides seductively around the stage, occasionally wrapping herself around one of two dance poles, inviting men to tip her. A few tuck dollar bills into her garter belt. Later, she encourages the men to pay extra for a more private dance.

Less than 50 feet away, in the house they've owned since 1967, Margaret and Charles Campbell are trying to sleep. That hasn't been easy since Danny and Dave's opened nearly two years ago.

The couple, in their 80s, sleeps with the windows open in the summer -- putting them within earshot of everything next door.

Charles Campbell knows that on some nights young men straggle out of the club around 2:30 or 3 a.m., excited by liquor and the show. Many of them hang around the parking lot, graphically reliving the night's highlights.

"Where is your supervision and your laws?" Campbell wonders.

Throughout the city, others ask the same question. Many strip clubs appear to violate the city's zoning code -- some for years -- but they have been left largely unchallenged by city code enforcers.

Danny and Dave's, for instance, appears to violate the Columbus zoning code -- in effect when the club opened -- that prohibits strip clubs from opening within 500 feet of a house or 1,000 feet of another club.

City officials say they intend to crack down on strip clubs. And they will do it armed with an ordinance the City Council rushed into effect July 30 as an emergency -- a law that severely restricts where clubs can open but doesn't affect existing clubs.

But the Campbells, and even some club owners, wonder what good a tougher law will do in a city

that didn't enforce the old law.

"The law's been on the books all the time," said Michael West, who operates two local strip clubs. "They just never enforced it."

City officials defend their record. They say they responded to complaints whenever they received them.

"I think we're handling these consistently," said John Rosenberry, the city's code-enforcement supervisor.

He points to adult spots around town, including the Aegean night club on Parsons Avenue and the Wet Spot topless car wash on W. Mound Street, which the city shut down because of violations.

Officials say some strip clubs have skirted the zoning code, mainly by opening as restaurants or bars, then quietly adding nude or semi-nude dancing. They say the new law will be more easily enforced because it more precisely defines a strip club and more tightly restricts where they can open.

The city has played tug-of-war with strip clubs for years, but now the stakes are higher: New clubs are a world away from the strips clubs of old.

Moving out

For years, Columbus adult dance clubs were small and concentrated in the inner city or in townships just outside the city. They still can be found on Sullivant, Livingston, Hamilton, Main and other urban thoroughfares. They cater to a mostly blue-collar crowd and feature women dancing in G-strings and bras or pasties for a few dollars in tips.

Typically, the older clubs are traditional bars with small stages, a CD player and a few mirrors for effect.

But in the past decade, big, stand-alone showbars sprouted among the Giant Eagles, Borders Books and doctors offices on Bethel Road, Rt. 161, Kenny Road and Cleveland Avenue near I-270 - some of the city's busiest commercial strips. They are radically different from the inner-city clubs.

They're bigger, bolder and brassier. The four staples of strip-club decor -- mirrors, flickering lights, dance poles and black lights -- are there. But new clubs include walls of mirrors, a center stage surrounded by dancing lights, and state-of-the-art sound systems.

Heavy advertising, including billboard and print campaigns, highlights their main attraction: nude or semi-nude women.

Dancers in clubs that serve alcohol typically wear pasties and G-strings to avoid citations from state liquor agents. Clubs without liquor licenses generally offer nude dancing.

The new clubs cater to businessmen, conventioners and suburban bachelor parties. Full menus

and imported beers replace the pretzels and Budweisers of the old spots.

The clubs pay \$5,000 or more to attract top performers, and they hustle souvenir T-shirts, calendars, shot glasses and golf balls.

Drawing attention

Modern clubs -- Columbus Gold I, Columbus Gold II (now called Dock Side Dolls), Pure Platinum, Sirens, Kahoots and the Dollhouse -- are far more visible than their predecessors.

And that, some observers say, is why they're drawing the city's attention.

"The reason this issue is receiving a lot of scrutiny is precisely because of where these strip clubs are trying to locate," said **Jeffrey M. Lewis**, a Columbus attorney who specializes in zoning and civil rights cases.

"These places aren't in slummy neighborhoods. They're in good neighborhoods. You'll get much quicker and more pointed response from decision makers, even though this is something the poor communities have been screaming about for years."

Operators agree.

"If I was over on Weber Road, do you think anyone would give a - - - about me?" asked Drayton Nay, manager of Sirens strip club and restaurant, which opened in June on Cleveland Avenue. "Of course not. It's the same old story: Let's keep all the bad stuff in the bad part of town."

City officials were particularly embarrassed when Pure Platinum opened next to Columbus Gold on Bethel Road, mocking the city's ban on strip clubs operating within 1,000 feet of one another.

"That brought the issue to the forefront for a lot of people," Councilman Richard W. Sensenbrenner said.

In a memo outlining efforts to battle strip clubs, Sensenbrenner and Councilman Michael C. Mentel wrote that "the newest version of these establishments stretch the limits of our current zoning code and its definitions."

Making big money

Columbus' newest version of strip clubs are big business.

"It's definitely growing and becoming more mainstream," said Don Waitt, publisher of Exotic Dancer, an industry trade magazine. "They're putting a lot more money into the clubs, into promotions. It's out of the back alley. It's big business now."

Sirens' owners paid more than \$1 million for the former Cheddar's restaurant and say it cost them another million to renovate it. Pure Platinum's owners say they dropped \$2 million into what also had been a restaurant.

Those expenses require revenue to match. Nay says Columbus Gold took in more than \$80,000 a week -- more than \$4 million a year -- when he managed it. Kahoots took in slightly less. And Sirens, he said, could top them all.

The second-floor "champagne room," rented by groups for private parties at Sirens, goes for \$250 an hour. At Pure Platinum -- which opened in February as a "private, BYOB club" -- a nude dance in a small, private room goes for \$30. For \$10, a dancer will perform a private dance at a table, or a lap dance, squirming seductively on a patron's lap.

Admission to Pure Platinum is \$20. At the Dollhouse, which serves liquor, it's \$8 when a porn star performs.

"What you're seeing now is a more upscale gentleman's club, a multimillion-dollar facility," said Kahoots manager Shane Carlisle, who worked in showbars in Texas and Tennessee.

Kahoots doesn't even bill itself as a strip club. Instead, it calls itself "a wild place to eat" and caters to businessmen.

Dancers named Carmen, Keely, Jasmine, Bridget and Sky sashay topless -- except for see-through pasties -- to a heavy dance beat on an elevated runway.

While waitresses serve drinks and dinner, the announcer invites customers -- nearly all men between ages 25 and 45 -- to tip the dancers.

"Remember," he announces, "the girls get paid on your tips and your tips alone." And he notes that a money machine can be found in the lobby -- one that doesn't identify Kahoots on the receipt.

Luring the thirsty

Strip clubs with liquor licenses make the lion's share of their money like any other bar -- through the sale of alcohol. Some revenue comes from food and cover charges, but the strippers are merely bait to lure in customers -- and to make them stay.

Many clubs feature a two-drink minimum at inflated prices.

Those without liquor licenses, such as Pure Platinum, typically charge a high entrance fee and allow customers to bring their drinks. Then they charge a \$2.50 "storage" fee for each beer consumed or \$4.50 for each mixed drink.

That approach prompted state liquor agents and Columbus police to raid the club Thursday night, claiming Pure Platinum was circumventing state liquor laws.

As for the main attraction, strippers almost are never paid by the clubs. Some require that strippers pay the club to dance -- up to \$50 a night at the fanciest places. Strippers, in return, receive tips and money from lap dances or more exclusive private dances.

A 22-year-old Pure Platinum dancer who identified herself as Katie said she can make up to \$1,000 a night on tips.

She came to Columbus because she was sick of working in Cleveland and thought her chances were better in white-collar Columbus, she said.

"It's the capital of Ohio," she said at about 4 a.m. on a recent Sunday, as strobe lights flickered and dancers strutted.

Katie said the money pays her way through community college in Cleveland, where she says she majors in business.

She wore a feathery, white tube top and a hint of gold glitter on her eyelids, and said she considers herself an entertainer.

"I take more pride in being a good dancer than taking off my clothes," she said. "Guys are willing to pay their money for someone they can't have," she said, as "Lick It Up" by Kiss thumped in the background.

Under the city's new zoning ordinance, Pure Platinum and virtually all other strip clubs would not have been able to open at their present locations.

The ordinance restricts the clubs to manufacturing districts. It also prohibits any club from opening within a half-mile of a house, school, library, hospital, park, recreation center, day-care center, or other adult-entertainment club.

Making laws

City officials said they adopted a stricter code after growing frustrated with clubs that circumvented the old code.

"The code did not address these businesses the way (it) should have," said Assistant City Attorney Daniel W. Drake.

The old code, for instance, required dance clubs to be at least 500 feet from a house.

That didn't stop Danny and Dave's from opening between houses on Greenlawn Avenue. Nor did it stop Mannhattans from opening in the middle of a residential area on the North Side.

That's in part because city-code enforcement officers generally have responded only to complaints. They didn't go looking for violations, officials said.

So nothing stopped Bare Facts and Mirage from opening on E. Main Street -- even though both back up to homes.

The city's old ordinance also prohibited strip clubs from opening within 1,000 feet of one another. Yet Pure Platinum and Columbus Gold sit almost next to each other on Bethel Road, and Bare

Facts and Mirage are nearly across the street from one another.

City officials say older clubs are being examined, and the new ordinance allows the city to aggressively regulate future clubs.

"I can't speak to individual places," said Rosenberry, the city's code-enforcement supervisor. "But we anticipate with the stricter language an increase in inspection activity."

Rosenberry and other city officials say one reason strip clubs haven't been cited in the past is that they often open as legally zoned bars, restaurants or nightclubs. Officials said they later were surprised to find stripping going on -- even though some, such as Columbus Gold, widely advertised as strip clubs.

"There are probably a lot of them out there that the city doesn't even know" about, said Peggy McElroy, the president of the Northwest Civic Association, who has complained to the city about Columbus Gold.

Drake said the city isn't sure how many strip clubs exist. A check of phone books and advertisements, as well as visits to clubs, indicate more than 20 operate in the Columbus area, most within the city limits.

The city is fighting Columbus Gold, Columbus Gold II, Kahoots and Sirens over zoning or building code violations. City Council voted to oppose a liquor license application for Pure Platinum.

The city also has opposed liquor license renewals for showbars such as Misty's, at 3657 E. Livingston Ave., where vice officers in December reported dancers simulating oral sex and intercourse.

But if residents in other areas of town have been screaming about clubs in their neighborhoods, city records don't show it. No other clubs have been cited, according to city code enforcement files.

Some residents say they don't care about nearby strip clubs.

"It doesn't bother me, and I don't bother them," said Ida Reed, who lives across the street from the Mirage strip club on E. Main.

The same is true for some neighbors of Manhattans, a club in the Devonshire subdivision north of Rt. 161 and west of Karl Road.

"I don't have any problem with it," said Kenny Beck, who has lived in the neighborhood for more than 30 years. "We hardly ever hear anything. A few nights, maybe at 2 or 2:30, but mostly, we don't hear a thing."

Others find the clubs offensive and want them out.

Down the street from Manhattans, Denise Smukal is particularly concerned about the influence on

her children, 7-year-old Monica and 4-year-old Joshua.

"The kids walk by and see that and say, 'What's that?' " she said. "It hasn't been a real big hassle living near it; it's just knowing that it's there."

Club managers and owners say as long as there is demand for strippers, there will be strip clubs. Nay, the manager of Sirens and a former Chippendale's dancer, paints it all as fun.

"I'm throwing the best party in Columbus," he said.

jweiker@dispatch.com

mferenchik@dispatch.com

CITATION (APA STYLE)

Ferenchik and Jim Weiker, M. (2001, August 20). CITY HAS PAID SCANT ATTENTION TO STRIP CLUBS. *Columbus Dispatch, The (OH)*, p. 01A. Available from NewsBank: America's News: <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ref.ualibrary.org/apps/news/document-view?p=NewsBank&docref=news/10DD3C4AFA040D00>.

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH Copyright (c) 2001 The Dispatch Printing Co.