

https://www.frontiersman.com/news/alaska-state-fair-officials-continue-to-fight-for-liquor-license/article_e324dc06-23b1-11e9-8d97-173e4d71d6b0.html

Alaska State Fair officials continue to fight for liquor license

By Tim Rockey Frontiersman.com Jan 29, 2019



PALMER — Alaska State Fair General Manager Jerome Hertel is fighting for fairgoers' rights to consume alcohol at the fair for the second time in three years.

The most recent difficulty with the fair's liquor license comes at the question of what liquor license category they qualify under. Hertel says that due to auditors monitoring the state Alcohol Control Board, the recreational site liquor license the fair has held for 37 years has not been renewed, and discussion was tabled until the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board's Feb. 9 meeting.

“The state fair is popular and they have public sentiment and so it's a way to hold our license hostage, I guess you could say, until it prompts legislation. We could be without a license if the legislature has problem getting it through, so they should allow us to operate as we have in the past and then work on that legislation,” Hertel said.

The state fair is fighting the fight on two fronts. More than 3,800 signatures have been gathered in an online petition to the ABC's board to renew fair's recreational site license. Sen. Peter Micciche introduced Senate Bill 16, which would create new licenses for state fairs, performing arts theaters and concert permits. Hertel has been making the rounds to cities, boards, and businesses in the Valley who could be affected by the state fair.

“It's disheartening the amount of time and resources that have been devoted to this when it's work that the ABC board should be recommending and doing themselves. There's not a license category for the Fair. Isn't it their job to serve these organizations and change rules and regulations so that there is a license category that fits us specifically? If they're calling it into question then fix it,” Hertel said.

Hertel said that the fair has had very few violations in the 37 years it has held a liquor license from the state. In 2017, the ABC board called into question the fair's ability to serve alcohol from multiple locations. Hertel said he was notified by the board and they went to argue against it. The state fair has always had a recreational site license because there is no category of liquor license that fits the Fair. This had been called into question at previous meetings, but Hertel says that the fair was always given a warning prior so that they could state their case. That was not so for the December meeting.

“We expected to get approved like it has for the last 37 years. Whenever they've indicated that this might be called into question, they've notified us so that we could be present for the board meeting. We applied for our license and they gave us no indication that it was going to be an issue,” Hertel said.

While liquor sales are not a majority of the state fair's revenue, it does represent a substantial portion. Hertel said the state fair generates \$23 million a year to the local economy, including \$100,000 in just tax monies. Hertel says that the ability to enjoy a beer or glass of wine at the state fair is an important and vital part of the social atmosphere. When the fair saw a decrease in attendance in 2017 due to a poor economy and rainy weather, Hertel says the alcohol sales helped to keep the fair afloat.

“Had we not had alcohol sales in a year like that it would've been devastating,” Hertel said.

Hertel said that a rule was passed by the ABC board that required past precedents to be kept in consideration. He feels that did not happen at the December meeting. He has solicited the help of the Valley delegation of legislators, economic development boards, local businesses, city councils, and the Governor to appeal to the ABC board to renew the state fair's liquor license.

“There is a pretty huge effort to get support statewide,” Hertel said. “The problem is they're not willing to create a license that fits our business model to the t. My take is why are we doing your work for you. They should be the ones recommending to the governor's office to enact legislation or statutes that create a license category that exactly fits our business model,” Hertel said.

Hertel and the ASF have been promoting SB16, but are also gearing up for the Feb. 9 ABC board meeting.

“Having a beer or a glass of wine at the fair or an event on the grounds is a very important part of the attendee experience and the State Fair is an asset to the state the local economies,” Hertel said.

Contact Frontiersman reporter Tim Rockey at tim.rockey@frontiersman.com.