Who Can Revoke a Liquor License?

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There has been a controversy during recent months surrounding three downtown Saint Louis night clubs whose rowdy patrons have been accused of causing repeated disturbances and arrests, including multiple shootings. All three clubs were threatened with losing their liquor licenses, but two of the clubs have cleared their hearings, and a third, Lure, continues to face the possibility of losing its liquor license. Some of the controversy springs from conflicting accounts of whether or not rowdy brawlers actually came out of Lure, while many insist that Lure is being unfairly targeted because of its African-American customers on the establishment's hip-hop-themed Thursday nights.

One group that is fighting to close down Lure is the Partnership for Downtown St. Louis, headed by Maggie Campbell. According to downtown Saint Louis business owner Bob Ray in his letter to the editor printed in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Partnership for Downtown St. Louis is trying to overstep its rightful authority as a civilian group. From his letter:

The Partnership for Downtown St. Louis is seeking to participate in the approval and revocation of liquor licenses downtown.

[...]
I am shocked by the subjective nature of the Partnership's process. The Partnership does not have an official policy detailing the criteria or evidence required to trigger the revocation process. When asked whether a nongovernmental membership
organization with no public accountability should have the right to oversee the revocation and issuance of liquor licenses, Ms. Campbell said that the Partnership considers closing down a business to be its right under the First Amendment.

David Stokes has discussed in this blog the unlawfulness of revoking liquor licenses as punishment for unrelated infractions, such as customers smoking cigarettes in areas where they are banned. The Partnership for Downtown St. Louis seeks to take this a step further, by placing the power to grant or revoke a license into the hands of one group of civilians. There is already an established legal process for dealing with dangerous businesses or persons who disturb the peace. If a particular business makes it through this process with its liquor license intact, it is not the job of the Partnership for Downtown St. Louis to take that license away.

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