

Enough, already, on Second Street

BY GARRY DAVIS,
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Earlier this year, a lot of us began an effort to revitalize a key business district in El Cajon by forming the Second Street Business Association—Alliance for a Better Community. What we hope to promote is a balanced mix of businesses that generate jobs and revenue for our local economy.

“Balance” is the key word.

Over the years, Second Street has slipped out of balance. This is due to a lot of reasons, but one big one is alcohol-related crime – public drunkenness, aggressive panhandling by transients, vandalism, petty thefts, assaults and other crimes – many of which are committed by what police call “serial inebriates,” transients and others who gravitate toward Second Street’s grittier offerings.

Experts, including local police, say that having an excessive number of alcohol outlets in an area only contributes to these kinds of problems.

For example, a study last year in [California](#) found that every dollar of alcohol revenue costs the community more than \$8 in public health and safety costs. That study was conducted by the [National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University](#).

In a perfect world, I wouldn’t care much about the number of liquor outlets on Second Street. But the truth is that having loads of businesses that sell alcohol is having a huge impact on all the other businesses in the area; while some are making money selling alcohol, the rest of us are sweeping up – or, in some cases, mopping up – the ugly aftereffects.

Those aftereffects keep potential customers away.

Believe it or not, that’s one reason the state has guidelines that recommend only one alcohol license be allowed for every 2,000 residents. Unfortunately, these guidelines are not binding and they are routinely disregarded by [local planning](#) groups.

Pacific Beach, for example, has at least one alcohol license for every 312 residents – well in excess of the state’s guidelines. And we all know the problems those residents face.

Numerically, Second Street's ratio is actually worse, with one license per 286 residents. There are at least two alcohol outlets per block in the Second Street business district.

Yet another business – corporate giant [Walgreens](#), no less – has applied to sell alcohol at its Second Street location. Despite being denied again and again along the way, the company is prepared to take its case to the El Cajon [City Council](#). It's appeal is scheduled to be heard tonight.

The company has already tried – and failed – to secure approval from the California [Alcohol Beverage Control](#), the El Cajon community planning director and the El Cajon Planning Commission. The police department's recommendation was no as well.

It's important to note that denial of Walgreen's license has been based on community input, public health concerns, high crime levels around Second Street and an over-saturation of alcohol outlets in this part of town.

Personally, I don't have anything against Walgreens – or any one business that sells alcohol. I do, however, have a problem when an area slides sideways over time, becoming a place where transients and street drinkers are more at home than taxpaying residents.

Walgreens will certainly try to make the point that it's just trying to be competitive with other stores. The problem is the other stores got here first. And a few of them should never have got in at all, just based on common sense and the ABC's guidelines.

We are all full up.

No matter what they say at City Council, Walgreens won't go out of business because it can't sell a six-pack or a bottle of wine. If that's the case, it started with a poor business plan.

The rest of us, however, have a great business plan for Second Street. It involves building a profitable customer base, luring real consumers to a lively, walkable business district.

We can do better – and should – by saying no to more booze on Second Street.

Please be heard on this issue by calling the council at (619) 441-1788. Better yet, come to the council hearing tonight.

Davis is owner of El Cajon Auto Electric on Second Street. He is a lifelong El Cajon resident and current chair of the Second Street Business Association–Alliance for a Better Community.