

Every liquor store has a bar in Superior

By Jay Gabler
Duluth News Tribune

SUPERIOR — The city code is unambiguous. “No ‘Class B’ license or permit may be granted for any premises that does not accommodate on-premises seating for service of at least six patrons.”

In this case, a “Class B” license permits the sale of intoxicating liquor. In other words, every liquor store in Superior also needs to have a bar.

“It is the only city in the state of Wisconsin that has that code,” said Mark Casper, owner of Keyport Liquor Store, Restaurant & Lounge in Superior’s downtown. “Basically, liquor stores operate under a bar license, so the hours of operation are different than most of the places around the state.”

The result of this long-standing law is a distinctive city culture of bars attached to liquor stores. Some have been around for generations, like President Bar & Liquor Store in the Allouez neighborhood. Others are much newer. All have their fans.

“I bought the bar on Sept. 16, 1957,” said President owner Jim Bolin, speaking with a reporter last week in the liquor store’s office booth. “I built the liquor store, and then I built a convenience store and then I built a car wash. Then about three years ago I sold (the convenience store and the car wash), and I have just this left.”

When Bolin later strolled over to the bar side, customers greeted him by name. “This is my hometown,” said Bolin, pointing. “I was born 5 miles from here and I live 1 mile that way.”

“Everybody in the area comes here, the whole neighborhood,” said Cassie Nielsen, who was relaxing at the bar. “It’s just a good vibe.”

Good vibes are prized at Superior’s liquor store bars, which customers and staff say are generally lower-key than the city’s standalone bars.

“I’m getting older,” said a genial senior sitting at Belknap Liquor & Lounge on Monday afternoon. “I don’t want to be fighting my way out the door.”

“Or have that jukebox so loud!” added bartender Art Petrey.

“Oh, that too.” Petrey has been a regular behind the bar at Belknap since he was asked to fill in during the blizzard of ‘91. “It’s something to do. It’s not hard work,” said Petrey about his longstanding employment. “Keeps me out of bars!” he quipped, to his customer’s amusement.

The precise reasons for Superior’s distinctive legal arrangement have receded to the mists of civic history, and few people approached by the News Tribune were eager



President Bar and Liquor Store, originally just a bar, has been owned and operated by Jim Bolin since Dwight D. Eisenhower was president.

to examine that history. There was a sense that too much talk might lead to some kind of shake-up, and people at the existing establishments like things just the way they are.

One reason often proffered is that the law makes it more difficult for large, national chain stores to start competing with the locals. “The theory,” said Casper, is that “this was started many, many years ago to keep the big box(es) out of the town. And it’s worked very effectively to do that, for the most part.”

For example, when the supermarket chain Aldi was opening a store in Superior, said city clerk Camila Ramos, it pursued a license that would allow the store to sell liquor. “Every other municipality has been able to issue to them, but I couldn’t,” said Ramos, “because they didn’t have that seating that our code required.”

Thus, Aldi sells only beer and seltzer. The situation is different at the East End Super One off U.S. Highway 53, which accurately advertises “Bar & Liquor.” It’s Wisconsin’s only Super One to have a bar, said manager Susie Kitter Pederson.

“I opened the store almost seven years ago,” she said. The tiny six-seat bar, supplemented by a couple of high-top tables, is so novel that it’s become a tourist attraction for out-of-towners.

“They cannot even believe it,” said Kitter Pederson. “They come in and take selfies, or we take pictures of them. We’ve let them stand right back there and take their picture by the bar, and they love it.”

Unlike at many other liquor store bars, where the lounge is walled off from the sales floor, Super One’s “Harbor View Bar” is right out there with the stacked

cases of beer. Kitter Pederson said the tiny bar is popular with people stopping by after work, but it gets “really busy” on Saturday mornings.

“A lot of guys come in here, and their wives go shopping” at the adjacent grocery store, she said. “Then (the wives) come back and they’re like, ‘Hey, I’m so glad you have this bar. Now they carry my groceries.’”

There’s also a Super One adjacent to Keyport, but in that case, the latter establishment handles the bar traffic. “We are the bar, we are the liquor store,” said Casper, who started the business in 1991.

“I would say we tend to be probably a little bit of the older crowd,” said Casper. “It’s not your typical young person’s bar.” Younger patrons are more likely to show up during live music and trivia events, the owner continued, “but there’s still a lot of the older crowd, too, that participates in both of those.”

“It’s not a bar that’s filled with young, drunk teenagers,” said Nielsen, at President. “You come here, you chill out, you have a good time.”

Over the decades, said Bolin, President has seen its share of sales to sailors who come in on freighters. “The boats come in to load taconite, and the crew come in to settle that taconite dust with a little beer.”

In recent years, President staff said, that particular clientele has dwindled as shipping companies and the Coast Guard have tightened policies regarding liquor brought on board their vessels — whether in bottles or in bellies.

There have been other changes as well. Staff at President can remember when the bar had a line of booths for the benefit of women, who couldn’t sit at the bar itself. Petrey, who’s decorated the walls of the Belknap



Photos by Jay Gabler / Duluth News Tribune
Art Petrey has been tending bar at Superior’s Belknap Liquor and Lounge since being called in to help out during a 1991 blizzard.



Bartender Art Petrey has decorated the walls of the Belknap bar with photos depicting Superior’s past.

bar with historical photos, described extensive renovations he’s seen over his decades of service.

“I met a lot of wonderful people here,” said Petrey. “I’ve got one salesman that’s making a special trip up here this Thursday, just to say hi to us again. He’s retired, and he’s just going to come up.”

Bolin said he sees

“repeat customers that come from far and wide, and come some of them annually. Some of them monthly, some of them weekly, some of them more often.”

In addition to creating challenges for large chains, the law also constrains liquor sales at other spots that don’t have bars. “So the gas station cannot sell spirits, cannot sell hard

liquor,” said Ramos, the city clerk. “That’s the license that they are not allowed to obtain within the city.”

“People like family businesses in Superior,” said Keyport owner Casper, “and we appreciate their patronage.”

“It might be boring to somebody,” said Nielsen, sitting at the President bar. “It’s not boring to me.”

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