Sunday alcohol sales in county?

Supporters want issue put to voters in referendum

BY CARLOS GALARZA-VEVE
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WALHALLA — A movement is under way to allow for countywide sales of alcohol on Sundays.

At Tuesday's Oconee County Council meeting, a representative of the Greater Oconee Chamber of Commerce will ask elected officials to pass an ordinance that would allow voters to decide the issue in a referendum during the general election Nov. 4.

Dick Cottingham, a principal owner of the Lighthouse Restaurant near the shores of Lake Keowee on Doug Hollow Road, will

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Oconee County Council will hear a proposal at its meeting Tuesday night that would allow voters to decide on the issue of Sunday alcohol sales during November's general election.

FILE

ALCOHOL: Could be on November ballot

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make the pitch on behalf of a chamber task force that's been studying the benefits of Sunday alcohol sales in the county.

"It'll be a big economic development boost for the county," Cottingham told The Journal on Thursday. "Newberry County passed a similar referendum not too long ago, and it is getting more than $40,000 a month in (Hospitality Accommodations Tax). I think we have seen an explosion of these referendums across South Carolina. If we don't do it, we'll be looked at, frankly, as being behind the times."

Cottingham said it wasn't that many years ago that Blue Laws kept retailers from opening for business on Sundays.

"I go to church on Sunday, and sometimes after church I'll go off and buy something at Lowe's or The Home Depot, as many other people do," he said. "There was a time you couldn't do that."

According to Cottingham, more than 30 counties throughout the state have established Sunday alcohol sales.

Seneca voters overwhelmingly approved Sunday sales in the city in 2012.

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> Lighthouse Restaurant principal owner

Recently, Stuart Pohl — owner of The Spot on Ram Cat Alley and a major booster of Sunday alcohol sales — told The Journal that 2013 was a record-breaking year for him in sales, and he attributed the success, in part, to having a state Department of Revenue (DOR) license to sell alcohol on Sundays.

Jillian Lusk, executive director of the Oconee Chamber, said an internal poll of members taken the first week of January showed overwhelming support for the initiative. Lusk said 51 members responded to the poll, and 96 percent approved of having Oconee County pass an ordinance that would put to a referendum the Sunday alcohol sales issue.

"We are supportive," Lusk said. "We do believe something like this will support economic development in our area."

Vanessa Penton, executive director of the Walhalla Chamber of Commerce, said the organization does not take a position on political issues, but allows chamber members to decide one way or the other.

Sandra Powell of the Westminster Chamber said the board might take up the issue when it meets Wednesday.

"We have not been approached by restaurants in Westminster about this," Powell said.

The initiative, if approved by voters, would allow businesses to apply for a permit from DOR that allows Sunday alcohol sales. Restaurants with a permit could serve alcohol on Sunday on the premises. Grocery and convenience stores would be able to sell beer and wine, but liquor stores would not be permitted to sell on Sundays.

Cottingham said the Oconee Chamber's task force checked with the Seneca Police Department to see if there have been any negative consequences to having Sunday alcohol sales.

"Police officials told us there's been no increase in problems because of Sunday sales," Cottingham said.

Cottingham said he hopes County Council has first reading of an ordinance on Sunday alcohol sales in February. He said it would take the normal course of three readings and a public hearing.

"If approved by council, our citizens would be able to vote yes or no," he said.

carlos@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6686