



Licensed Beverage & Hospitality

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New Liquor License Auction System an Economic Opportunity for the Columbia Falls Area

The passage of Senate Bill 5 in the Special Legislative Session will have a big impact not only in revenue generated by the State of Montana but for many of the state's smaller communities that "bump" into their neighboring cities. The bill changes the way licenses are awarded when a population increase in a quota area is enough to warrant additional active licenses. And the Columbia Falls area is one of the best examples of the opportunity created in the Special Session for these communities.

The Montana Legislative Fiscal Division anticipates that three all beverage licenses, one beer and wine license and one restaurant beer and wine license will enter the Columbia Falls area market over the next four years. These will all be available licenses, a 23% increase in the total number of establishments that can serve alcohol.

Currently in the Columbia Falls area there are:

- Eight All Beverage licenses
- Seven beer/Beer and Wine licenses
- Four Restaurant Beer and Wine licenses
- One Brewery Sample Room license
- One Fraternal License; and
- One Golf Course license.

These 22 on-premise alcohol licenses equate to one location per 238 citizens, a number which includes children and the roughly 30% of the population that choose not to consume alcohol. But Senate Bill 5 increases that number based on the growing population in the Columbia Falls area.

"The population-based quota system works to balance what our communities look like for drinkers and non-drinkers alike," explained Montana Tavern Association President Dax Cetraro. "The changes made during the recent special session are one more example of how the alcohol license system adjusts over time to a growing and evolving Montana."

This growth won't happen overnight. Senate Bill 5 allows up to three additional licenses per year; one each of all beverage, beer and wine and restaurant beer and wine. None of the new licenses will have gaming attached to them so they are more likely to go to new and existing restaurants. The hope is this will encourage more restaurants and bars, allowing more people to experience a great night out at a local restaurant, enjoying locally grown food.

Other areas around the state that will feel this impact include Bozeman/Belgrade, Helena/East Helena, Red Lodge/Bear Creek, Hamilton/Pinesdale and Eureka/Rexford.

Senate Bill 5 was signed by Governor Bullock on November 24 and has an immediate effective date.

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