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Revenue On The Rise But Crime Isn't In Wills Point And Emory

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Perhaps to the chagrin of those opposed to alcoholic beverage sales, neither town has exactly gone to the gates of ruin since.

In fact, officials in both cities say not much has changed at all — except the monthly sales tax revenues.

It is a situation that continues to be eyed somewhat enviously by supporters of three alcohol sales options on the ballot May 8 in Grand Saline and Fruitvale.

Wills Point saw a sales tax revenue increase of about \$50,000 in 2009 compared to 2008. Of that, about \$29,000 came in the last seven months when alcohol sales began.

The city is off to a very good start this year as well. Wills Point has seen its sales tax revenue increase by \$14,655.17 when comparing the first four months of 2010 to that of 2009.

City manager Jim Stephens said alcoholic beverage sales have helped keep the local economy strong.

"It certainly has helped us. It has not been the only reason our sales tax revenue is up, but I know people are buying other things in Wills Point when they come to buy beer or wine," he said.

As for some of the problems opponents to alcohol sales often predict, Wills Point Police Chief Scott Johnson said the crime-related ones have not materialized.

"Our crime has not increased, our DWIs have not increased at all, public intoxication has not increased any more than we've had in previous years, and we've had no murders, assaults or rapes at any of the stores. The only thing I can say has increased is our sales tax revenue," Johnson said.

The police chief added that he thinks limiting last year's local option election to beer and wine sales for off-premise consumption was a good idea.

"I think if we had liquor by the drink, we would have more problems because you have people sitting in somewhere drinking and then leaving. Off-premise consumption sales, though, has worked very well for us," he said.

Change In Fortune

While Wills Point's revenue gain since the introduction of alcoholic beverage sales is impressive, an even bigger turnaround can be seen just north of Van Zandt County in Emory.

The county seat of Rains has seen a sales tax revenue increase of almost \$37,500 from August 2009 to April 2010 compared to the same period a year earlier, before alcoholic beverage sales went into effect.

Perhaps even more importantly for the city, it is on pace to break a three-year slide in annual total sales tax revenue that started in 2007.

City administrator Mike Dunn said that benefit to the local economy has come without a jump in crime or the need to hire more police officers, and without tarnishing the appearance of the city.

"As far as the community is concerned, we haven't seen any big change in attitude in the city," he said. "Of course, we planned our ordinances really well. We made sure that we did not wind up with a lot of beer stores and big beer signs.

"Like any other small town, we want to keep our hometown appearance and still have the availability of beer and wine sales," Dunn said. "I feel we have done that and have done a good job taking care of our citizens."

Emory voters also approved an option for sale of mixed beverages at restaurants, but Dunn said no local restaurants have yet applied for a license through the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission.

"The mixed beverage license is much more expensive than one for just beer and wine. There are a couple of restaurants in town that would like to sell only beer and wine, but they will still have to apply for the mixed beverage license," the city administrator explained.

As for the crime issue, Dunn said it has not been an issue.

"We haven't seen any increase in DWI incidents or public intoxications," he said. "The increase in crime that some said would happen has not been there.

"I hope that does not change in the future, but I also know as Emory grows, you would have to expect some increase in crime," Dunn added. "But we haven't seen that yet and, to be honest, beer and wine sales really hasn't affected the community much at all in any negative way."

He said he was not surprised at a similar revenue boost in Wills Point.

"I think in the case of both cities, it is not like there has been a night-and-day change take place. You can't tell a great difference between wet and dry," Dunn said.

Johnson added that the stores selling beer and wine in Wills Point have stayed in compliance with TABC regulations and that there have not been problems thus far with underage sales.

"We have not had any problems with underage sales, and we have been watching," Johnson said. "They (store clerks) don't know it, but we have been watching and they are abiding by the law. As long as they do that, they are fine."

Although both cities appear to be doing better in the revenue column since going wet, there is not a rush to spend the money.

As Dunn put it, cities like Emory and Wills Point must continue to be frugal with revenue. A change in sales tax allocation law taking effect in 2014 means Emory will no longer receive revenue from a local furniture distribution firm.

"We are going to be losing sales tax from one of our businesses in town, so we need to watch what we do get and continue to be frugal even though right now we are getting more revenues from sales tax," he said.

"With sales tax, I don't think any city should depend on the consistency of sales tax especially in tough economic times," Dunn continued. "Emory has always relied on sales tax. We live off it, and it is a terrible thing to have to depend on.

"Cities need something completely consistent every month and every year. Our property tax base is small so we don't get a lot of ad valorem tax revenue. To rely on sales tax is a must here, and this increase is a big help, but we have to put back what we can and keep it for a rainy day," he said.

All things considered, though, Dunn said he is not hearing much complaining around town about beer and wine being available in stores.

"Honestly, I've heard no complaints, even from opponents of it when we started the sales," he said.