



The proposed measures ban drinking in public places here between 10.30pm and 7am. They also forbid retail shops from selling liquor from 10.30pm. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

By AMIR HUSSAIN

PROPOSED measures to curb public drinking and the sale of alcohol may be tough, but they are necessary, said Members of Parliament yesterday.

Slightly more than half of the 40 people The Straits Times polled also supported the Bill, believing it will help to reduce public order issues in public spaces, such as around neighbourhood 7-Eleven stores.

But others argued that it was an unnecessary clampdown on personal freedom and could even create illegal channels to buy alcohol after 10.30pm.

Ms Denise Phua (Moulmein-Kallang GRC) said she was satisfied the proposed Liquor Control (Supply and Consumption) Bill, which was introduced in Parliament yesterday, calls for a partial ban on public drinking and not a total ban, unlike in some other cities.

In New York, for instance, it is illegal to have an open container of alcohol while on a public sidewalk, on the road or in a park.

The new measures being planned ban drinking in public places here between 10.30pm and 7am. They also forbid retail shops from selling liquor from 10.30pm. Geylang and Little India will be designated Liquor Control Zones and have stricter rules.

Ms Phua, whose Kampong Glam ward covers the Little India area, said: "I am satisfied that MHA (Ministry of Home Affairs) took a calibrated and tiered approach, with stricter measures for higher-risk areas such as Little India and ring-fencing (of) residential common areas such as void decks and corridors.

"The majority of my residents in Little India will be pleased. They had given feedback on their

Alcohol curbs tough but necessary, say MPs

Many people back Bill, but others frown on clampdown on personal freedom

satisfaction with the existing temporary liquor restrictions implemented over the (past) year there. The provisions have substantially improved their living environment and sense of security."

In the wake of the Little India riot on Dec 8, 2013, temporary measures were put in place in the area to clamp down on public drinking and alcohol sales over weekends and public holidays.

Ms Tin Pei Ling (Marine Parade GRC), who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, said that simply designating certain areas for alcohol curbs would not work.

"An islandwide ban may be somewhat blunt, but I think it is necessary. This is because if the measures apply only to certain are-

as, drinkers will simply be displaced to other areas," she told The Straits Times.

Mr Hri Kumar Nair (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC), who chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, said: "For residents, one of their main complaints is the noise created by people who drink late at the void decks, and there is currently no effective way to deal with that issue. We are dealing with people's welfare here."

Several of the residents whom The Straits Times spoke to shared similar views.

Manager Jes Kiran, 39, said: "I think this will actually create less nuisance, especially near 7-Eleven stores, where you find groups of people who buy alcohol and sit all around drinking and littering

and there is rowdy behaviour."

Mr Muhammad Zahid, 35, a process technician, said people sometimes create a nuisance and even fight outside the 7-Eleven outlet near his block in Woodlands. Some also sleep at the void deck after drinking too much.

He hopes the proposed new measures will reduce these issues.

Property manager James Lim, 49, however, did not think the proposed measures were fair.

"After a hard day's work, people should be able to sit down and catch up (over drinks) wherever they want," he said.

Student Zhang Zhihong, 20, said: "There will always be demand for alcohol after 10.30pm. When you restrict the supply, won't there be a black market? Not everyone will pay for

alcohol in clubs."

Mr Lim Kim Seng, 42, who works in sales, said the 10.30pm cut-off was too early and suggested that 11.59pm would be better.

Singapore Management University law academic Eugene Tan admits that the Bill would result in an extreme shift for Singapore - "from one of the most lax regimes in the world with regard to alcohol sales and consumption, to being fairly restrictive".

But he said "the Bill is long overdue; irresponsible drinking in a very liberal regime has created lots of disamenities, particularly in residential areas".

"Hopefully the whole notion of responsible drinking will kick in.

"Ultimately, you can't police the whole island at any one time, so you really need people to buy

into why these changes are necessary. If there are better consumption patterns and habits, who knows, in a couple of years, you might see the regime relaxing a bit."

National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan said more data is needed before the public can decide whether the new Bill is necessary.

"What we need is to have data on the extent (to which) consumption of alcohol in public places was reported as public nuisance," she said.

"If there is no problem, and something like that is slapped on us, of course, it will be interpreted as (being) very harsh.

"But if there are incidents that have been reported, and they are sufficient for us to see this as a social issue, then that would suggest that the law has to step in."

There were 49 public order offences - such as serious hurt, rioting and affray - in Geylang in 2013, making it the least safe place in that regard when compared with other areas of congregation, such as Clarke Quay, Boat Quay, Chinatown and Joo Chiat.

Little India was second on the list with 25 public order offences in 2013.

Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics executive director Jolovan Wham also asked for "clear information".

He said: "This, to me, has singled out foreign workers unfairly. By designating Little India and Geylang as Liquor Control Zones, that is profiling and it's discriminatory.

"If it's of such a concern, we need statistics to show that crime has resulted because of alcohol in these areas."

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Additional reporting by Isaac Neo, Lim Yi Han and Hoe Pei Shan

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BLUNT BUT NECESSARY

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Young people drinking in Clarke Quay last Friday night. Many of them had bought alcohol from retail shops such as convenience stores. ST PHOTOS: CHEW SENG KIM



Dismay for young clubbers, relief for residents

THE plan to ban drinking in public places from 10.30pm to 7am is proving unpopular with young clubbers, but has been welcomed by residents living near entertainment districts.

The late-night gatherings around Clarke Quay and Robertson Quay have caused many living there to complain about the noise and littering that takes place on weekends and every Wednesday, which is earmarked "Ladies Night" by many clubs.

When The Straits Times visited

these areas last Friday night, as many as 500 people - mostly young adults in their early 20s - were drinking in public after buying alcohol from retail shops such as a nearby 7-Eleven store.

In the vicinity of nightclub Zouk, groups sat on the floor drinking. On Read Bridge, a popular gathering place in Clarke Quay, young people lined the sides, many with drinks in hand.

They said they preferred to get a buzz first from cheaper alcohol bought from convenience stores,

before heading to clubs where drinks are more expensive.

Even after midnight, there were long queues for drinks at such stores, which currently stop selling alcohol only between 3am and 6am. The Bill introduced yesterday will not allow retail shops to sell alcohol after 10.30pm.

Student Desiree Chen, 21, said: "I can understand the rationale behind this, but perhaps the ban on public drinking in entertainment places like Clarke Quay can be pushed to a later time. Maybe the

ban should be kept to just residential zones."

Another student, 19-year-old Khoo Wei Hao, said: "There shouldn't be a ban here (in Clarke Quay) as it is an entertainment spot. It will be less 'happening'... a lot of people wouldn't want to go there any more."

But Singapore Nightlife Business Association president Dennis Foo said the proposed new regulations are a long time coming. "It's about time we became a really safe place," he said. "Retailers are

selling their alcohol at a fraction of our bar price. Many purchase cheap alcohol from convenience stores, get themselves drunk in places like Read Bridge, and enter the bars and clubs and make a nuisance and get into fights.

"We get the brunt of this and it's really unfair."

Residents also believe the proposed rules will help clean up the area. One 42-year-old who resides at Watermark at Robertson Quay condominium and wanted to be known only as Mr Tan, said:

"There are broken glasses and a lot of littering on Wednesdays and weekends. The restrictions will help address these problems."

Mr Rahul Kalia, a 39-year-old businessman who lives at Tribeca by the Waterfront condominium in Kim Seng Road, said: "I've never felt unsafe, but you can see littering and there can be a bit of noise. It is a good proactive measure to prevent anything worse from happening."

AMIR HUSSAIN
LIM YI HAN