

Liquor board revokes license of Mt. Vernon bottle club

By Brent Jones, Baltimore Sun, November 14, 2008

The city liquor board revoked the bottle club license last night of the Suite Ultralounge nightclub in the basement of the Belvedere Hotel, one month after police say two people were shot and another stabbed during an altercation that started at the club.

Ultralounge, however, was granted a stay and will be allowed to remain open, pending an appeal to Baltimore Circuit Court.

About 25 Mount Vernon residents and business owners attended the four-hour hearing, with several condominium owners at the Belvedere testifying that patrons of Ultralounge are unruly, frequently fight and cause other commotions that can last until 3 a.m.

Liquor board commissioners said residents' testimony had the greatest influence on their decision, saying Ultralounge has not operated to protect the safety and welfare of the community. Jason Curtis, who lives in the Belvedere, testified that he has called police about 40 times because of rowdiness in the middle of the night.

"Incidents happen so often, it's not even worth trying to keep the dates," Curtis said.

The double shooting and stabbing, which occurred just after 2 a.m. Oct. 11 in front of the building in the first block of E. Chase St., brought the Ultralounge before the liquor board. Police said a man was shot in the wrist and chest, and a woman was shot in the leg. A man was also stabbed in the torso, according to police. All were taken to local hospitals.

At last night's hearing, Maj. John Bailey, the Central District commander, testified that the person police believe was the gunman had been thrown out of Ultralounge after a fight. Bailey said the man stood on the corner of Charles and Chase streets, waited for his victims and attacked. Bailey said 911 operators have received 45 separate calls about disorderly conduct calls and 16 calls about assaults for the Belvedere in the last year, and estimated that 90 percent of those calls were for patrons of Ultralounge.

"It's a public safety threat to the neighborhood," Bailey said.

City Councilman William H. Cole IV, whose district includes the Belvedere, testified that his office has received more complaints about Ultralounge than any other open business. Representatives from the Belvedere Neighborhood Association and Midtown Development Corporation also testified that the club is a neighborhood nuisance.

But the attorney for the club, Peter A. Prevas, argued that there are three other nighttime establishments in the Belvedere that could be contributing to the problems outside the building. The Owl Bar, the 13th Floor and Truffles are all in the Belvedere. The Owl Bar and the 13th Floor generally close at 2 a.m. on the weekends, the same time as

Ultralounge.

Louis V. Wood, the Ultralounge's manager, testified yesterday that he generally staffs his club, which can draw hundreds, with three to five security guards. Wood said he has hired two more security guards since the double shooting, has cooperated with police and has listened to residents' concerns about his business.

"I'm doing my part, but I can't provide security for the entire building," Wood said.

Liquor board officials also found Wood guilty of holding an expired permit for the club.

Two years ago, city police raided the space that now houses the club. Owner Sammy Hyun Paik was arrested and charged with infractions such as failing to register the bottle club and selling alcohol without a license.

Wood was charged with liquor violations and a gun violation. Prosecutors put the criminal charges on the inactive docket, and civil and criminal charges related to zoning violations have not been pursued.

Paik and Wood reopened the space as a bottle club, which operates as a de facto BYOB establishment. On June 1, a new state law took effect putting bottle clubs under the same liquor rules that govern bars, meaning the owner can be held accountable for the actions of his patrons.