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Liquor board hears many protests, hands down two suspensions

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The Board of Liquor License Commissioners for Baltimore City finished up its work last week on neighborhood challenges to liquor licenses. It handed down a couple of long suspensions, but renewed all of the licenses challenged. "We heard the most protests of renewal ever filed," said Steve Fogleman, chairman of the liquor board.

Neighbors and property owners within a one-block radius of a bar can protest the renewal of its license once a year by circulating a petition, getting at least ten signatures and presenting the petition to the liquor board. The board holds hearings and considers the challenges in April of every year, and decisions are due by April 30. All liquor licenses in the city run from May 1-April 30.

"The liquor board can do three things about a protest of renewal," explained Fogleman. "One, we can renew the license. Two, we can suspend the license. Three, we can fail to renew. We can fine them as well." Fogleman said that failing to renew is a last resort for "very limited occasions," generally when a licensee has been given many opportunities to clean up his bar's act and failed. He said that failure to renew was a "death sentence" for a bar, and a step that the liquor board does not take lightly. "We are very sensitive to the fact that this is someone's living," he said.

On the other hand, the liquor board understands the neighbors' right to live in peace and occasional quiet. "Most business owners understand the balance," said Fogleman. "Some don't. They're the ones who come before the board again and again." The liquor board handed down 30-day suspensions to two bars: Tabrizi's, which operates the Tiki Lounge, a floating barge on the river near Harborview in South Baltimore; and Rancho Manila, a bar in the 1700 block E. Lombard Street that has recently been the venue for fights, stabbings and a shooting. Tabrizi's will serve its suspension in July, which is prime time for floating beer barges. Fogleman said that the licensee had not been entirely honest with the liquor board when applying for the license extension for the barge, and that was one of the factors in the decision to suspend. Rancho Manila will start its suspension June 1.

Matthew Malaquias, who spoke for the neighborhood during the Rancho Manila hearing, said the neighborhood is grateful for the suspension. "We are hoping for some relief," he said. The violence in the block has escalated, however. Police responded to a call at 6:40 a.m. Friday, April 29, across the street from the bar and found a man lying in a pool of blood and partly under a parked car. The victim, a Hispanic man who police have not yet been able to identify, had been beaten and stabbed several times, and he had been stomped in the face. Paramedics pronounced the victim dead at the scene.

Police did not connect the crime to the bar, but neighbors say that the violence on the block started around the first of the year, when a different clientele began drinking at Rancho Manila. The neighbors are hiring a lawyer and will work with the Community Law Center to draft an operating agreement with the bar. "We are not really open to starting a conversation until [a lawyer is hired]," said Malaquias. The liquor board renewed the license of The Point in Fells after negotiations opened with the Fells Point Residents Association. Cliff Ransom, who spoke for his neighbors at the hearing on April 21, said that he did not know if the agreement had yet been signed by the owners and landlord of the bar.

"It's the same as it was," he said. "Nothing has changed so far." The liquor board also renewed the licenses of several Federal Hill bars after their owners agreed to negotiate with their neighbors, who had been complaining of trash, noise, unsanitary behavior and fighting among their youthful clientele.