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Town Council Approves Social District Ordinance

The Franklin Town Council has been considering the social district concept since their retreat in February 2023. At their January 2, 2024 meeting, a public hearing was held to gain public input related to a proposed social district. After hearing the 13 speakers who voiced their opinions, the Town Council voted unanimously to adopt the ordinance creating a social district.

What is a social district?

A social district is a designated outdoor area where people can legally consume alcoholic beverages. Social districts are regulated by the NC Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Commission and were approved by the NC Legislature in 2021.

What does this mean for citizens and visitors to Franklin?

There are still several steps that must be completed before the social district goes into effect and it is estimated that these steps will take at least 3 to 4 months. The ordinance has been adopted, but there are signage requirements to indicate the geographical area for the district including entry and exit points; design of specialized cups required for use in the social district that includes required language “Drink Responsibly – Be 21” and submission of required registration with the ABC Commission in Raleigh.

The hours of operation for the district will be Noon until 9:00 p.m. Monday through Sunday. At all other times, unless a permit has been obtained for a special event, consumption of alcohol on sidewalks and in public areas is prohibited. “Education will be provided to those ABC permitted establishments and merchants within the social district during the next few months to ensure that when the district does go live, all will be prepared,” said Town Manager Amie Owens. An operations plan and educational materials are being developed and will be shared with the public online and available in hard copy as part of the implementation of the social district.

How does this impact festivals and events?

Event sponsors will have the option to request that the social district be suspended during their events by simply checking a box on the street closure application. The Town Council will consider the request at the same time as the street closure – no additional steps required. The squares downtown (Clock Tower, Gazebo and Rankin) will remain alcohol-free at all times as they are owned by Macon County, not the Town of Franklin, and are not included in the district. Individuals who are observed taking their marked cups into these areas will be subject to fines.

“The Town Council was aware that there could be support for, and opposition to, the social district and are knowingly moving forward to provide new experiences and opportunities for citizens and visitors to Franklin,” noted Owens.

There are currently 38 municipalities in the state with active social districts. The social district concept is based in economic development principles to attract citizens and visitors to the downtown leading to increased foot-traffic and provide new revenue opportunities for restaurants and retail establishments.

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