

Champaign considers new ordinances regarding video gaming in local businesses

New state laws regarding the impacts of adding a sixth gaming terminal in local establishments are opening up discussion of revising city ordinances. At the Champaign City Council meeting this past Tuesday, some council members voiced concerns and others voiced excitement; but, the majority agreed to support changing ordinances to match state laws.

In June of 2019, the state of Illinois passed a gaming expansion bill that allows for video game usage in businesses such as bars and restaurants to increase. To comply with state laws, the Champaign City Council is in the process of creating ordinances. Ordinances allow for more flexibility because violators would receive a civil offense, but no criminal record or jail time. It is important to note that no new laws were passed at Tuesday's Study Session, and no decisions were officially voted on. The discussion began on how they will look into the pros and cons in order to make an educated decision on how many video game terminals, or VGTs, will be allowed.

Under current Illinois state law, gaming establishments are required to have a local liquor license, with the exception of truck stops. Right now, there are 62 businesses in the city with gaming. Eric Meyer, Champaign resident, and co-owner of Pia's Sports Bar and Bentley's Pub, explains why he believes video gaming has been a great asset. By the state expanding gaming in a variety of ways, "they allow for improvements, and add to employee benefits," Meyer said.

Meyer went on to explain the economic impact the expansion would have on the city. "Revenue is projected to grow 10-20% more with these gaming enhancements. It will put us well over one million dollars in the fiscal year 2019," Meyer said.

Even with the employee and economic benefits that Meyer claims will come with this expansion, some council members saw red flags. Councilman Tom Bruno explained that money is the least of his concerns.

“I don’t think having the sixth terminal would make it significantly easier to engage in gambling. There are different ways to spend money to find pleasure. It’s a freedom issue for me,” Bruno said.

Councilman Greg Stock explained that while he understands that they bring in money, he also knows they bring in problems.

“I hear stories of people being evicted from their houses, who are seeking assistance for food because they gamble away their checks. Yes, it’s good for city coffers, but I don’t think it is good for city citizens--which I think is why we are here,” Stock said.

However, Mayor Deborah Frank Feinen supports changing the ordinances to match state law. Feinen argues that, “The issues relate more to what’s going on in that area and not necessarily because there is gaming happening there.”

The topic will be continued to be discussed by city council until they officially vote on the matter.

Tuesday’s meeting also included discussion of cannabis, vaping, and tobacco ordinances. Although most of the new state law becomes effective Jan. 1, 2020, Kathryn Cataldo, the assistant city attorney, has already prompted the discussion of what actions the city has to take. Cataldo proposed alternatives that start with staff direction at cannabis facilities and in public spaces, such as schools.