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## The Next Move

# Bellevue, Wilkinsburg seek to end dry runs

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Mark Helbling remembers when the last best restaurant in Bellevue left and how invested he was in wanting it to stay.

It was Vivo, a highly respected restaurant that had a strong run of more than a decade on Lincoln Avenue and closed in 2011, reopening in Sewickley.

Helbling, who owns a home remodeling business, felt like he had to do something. So he bought the building.

"I bought it and took it over from the people who owned Vivo because I was so disappointed they were leaving," he said. "I never dreamed I would own the place."

Now, as president of the Borough of Bellevue's council, on which he's served for 14 years, Helbling has been working to help his North Hills suburban community take another big step to help restaurants stay and thrive there.

After advocates collected more than 500 signatures, Bellevue was to vote May 19 on a referendum to allow establishments with liquor licenses to operate within the community for the first time since Prohibition.

On the other side of Pittsburgh, Wilkinsburg near the East End also is pursuing a referendum to end its more than 80 years as a "dry town."

While Bellevue's referendum will mark the second time in the past six years it has pursued a campaign to allow liquor licenses in the borough, [Tracey Evans](#), executive director of the

Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation, said she believes her community's would be a first.

Both ballot measures will position the importance of liquor-serving establishments as an economic development tool over local concern about the potentially harmful effects of alcohol consumption.

Evans said the referendum is part of a larger master plan in Wilkinsburg and follows an update of the zoning code several years ago limiting liquor licenses to commercial and mixed-use areas.

"I feel it's an important piece in the tool kit we're developing right now to help make investment in the commercial business district," she said.

Wilkinsburg potentially could see five liquor-licensed establishments; Bellevue two. Both communities would need to establish the approval of their councils to allow more liquor licenses into their communities.

Evans said she has seen no organized opposition to the referendum in Wilkinsburg. But there are signs of opposition in Bellevue. No Bars in Bellevue, a community organization, has been fighting the ballot measure, seeking to maintain the community as family friendly.

[Ned Sokoloff](#), principal with Specialty Group, a Ross-based restaurant services firm, said Bellevue is unlikely to sustain a strong collection of restaurants in a community without the ability to serve alcohol.

"Nobody opens up little restaurants anymore without the ability to sell alcohol because you can't just make it on the food," said Sokoloff, who is working with Helbling.

Helbling could stand to benefit from a successful ballot measure if the current restaurant in the former Vivo space, Grille 565, pursues a liquor license, and he expects it will be hard for the place to sustain a business without it.

But he also said he cares about the overall health of the business community and sees an important advantage for Bellevue in setting the conditional terms for how liquor licenses will be used.

"We get a fresh start with fresh conditions," he said.

Evans expects the cost of liquor licenses — now typically between \$50,000 and \$90,000 — should result in quality operators instead of threadbare bars with cheap drink specials.

But she added she also expects to work with the Responsible Hospitality Institute, which has been active in the city to make sure the any incoming liquor licensees aren't disruptive to the community.

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