

Could beer ease school budget?

Contractor Richard Gardner thinks it likely

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KEY WEST — The man in charge of booking events at Key West High School says the Monroe County school district could make pretty good money if a ban on alcohol on school property were lifted to allow the sale of beer and wine at concerts, comedy shows and other events.

Richard Gardner contracts with the district to supervise events at the high school auditorium, known as the Glynn Archer Jr. Center for Performing Arts. Gardner said Thursday that promoters of national acts have inquired about price and availability of the auditorium. But when they learn they won't be able to sell beer and wine, they back out, he said.

"We've had the opportunity to bring in some performances in the past and that's been one of their issues," Gardner said Thursday. "One promoter had a license to serve alcohol and had done it at other schools, but it fell through because his revenue would have been through the beer and wine sales. That was the only way he could make tickets affordable for people to attend."

School Board member Andy Griffiths brought up the idea of relaxing district rules against alcohol on school property during a July 22 School Board meeting in Key West. Charging nonprofits, entertainers and other groups to use the schools for events would be a way for the district to make some money during tough budget years, he argued.

"I don't see a lot of children at fundraisers and many people aren't going to go to a fundraiser unless they can have a glass of beer," Griffiths said. "That's just the reality of a nonprofit fundraiser."

Gardner contacted Griffiths after hearing about Griffiths' suggestion. Gardner described discussions he's had with event promoters and shared his ideas to get the most profit from events. Gardner has booked such performers as singer/songwriter John Prine and comedienne Paula Poundstone and Sandra Bernhard.

Gardner said he's been approached by promoters for musician Van Morrison, guitarist Edgar Winter, and singer James Taylor, requesting space for concerts at Key West High School, but they changed their minds when they learned they wouldn't be able to sell alcohol.

Promoter Norman Bedford "has offered in the past to split the concession sales with some of the school groups as fundraisers if they could provide ushers and concession workers," Gardner said.

The high school charges between \$60 and \$100 an hour depending on the event; if it's a nonprofit group, the school charges just enough to cover custodial fees and utilities and a small service fee, Gardner said.

The district could make even more money if the district purchased a temporary license to sell its own beer and wine, Gardner said. With larger events, with the promoter providing security, the district could earn from \$1,500 to \$3,000 a night.

Gardner also suggests the district set up a Web site to sell tickets to events for all three high schools. People could go to the Web site, see a list of upcoming events at the high schools and buy groups of tickets using their credit cards. It's something Gardner has looked into. He also suggests selling tickets to school sporting events and plays on the site.

"The final drawback has been ticket sales," Gardner wrote Griffiths. "Keystix usually charges a negotiable service charge [to the promoter] of anywhere from 5 to 8 percent of the ticket cost."

The Tennessee Williams Theatre at Florida Keys Community College charges a \$1 per seat user fee for every ticket sold. When Key West High School offered them the use of the Archer Center after Wilma damaged the theater, the theater still charged a \$1 fee on each ticket though they were using the Archer Center, Gardner said.

"During that time, they made approximately \$4,000 in seat fees for a facility they were not using," Gardner wrote in his e-mail to Griffiths.

School Board member John Dick is opposed to lifting the ban, though he's not against adults drinking.

"Put me down for being against it," he said at the July 22 board meeting.

Sunny Booker, the district's Safe Schools coordinator, is against lifting the ban on alcohol for any reason, even at night and weekends, when many of the events would take place.

"Kids are around the school all the time. There should be one place in the Keys where alcohol is not the focus. I want my tax dollars to go for making a safe haven for [kids]," she said.

Gardner respects Booker's concern.

"I can understand where she's coming from, I have young kids, too, and I don't want them exposed to it. But most of the events would be after school hours. Anything at this point we can do to alleviate the budget crunch through fundraisers or through the promotion of this facility should be looked at."

Gardner also said that during the Prine concerts, he saw many adults with "small shot bottles of alcohol concealed in their clothing. As far as alcoholic beverages on school grounds after hours, let's face it, it is here."

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