

# New rules 'are threat to small bar scene'

BEATRICE THOMAS

WA's fledging small bar scene faces a major setback only two years after new laws paved the way for the niche venues, it has been claimed.

The threat is in new rules, which an industry group says could mire licence applicants in even more red tape than they already faced, deterring people from opening a venue.

After a slow take-up, the number of small bars is growing steadily. New industry figures show 28 small bar licences have been issued in WA, with about 20 bars now open in areas such as central Perth, Northbridge, Fremantle, Subiaco and in the country.

Another four applications are with the Liquor Licensing Authority and an equal number are in the pipeline.

But the Small Bar Association of WA said new rules from July 1 requiring prospective owners to get a local council zoning certificate showing their proposed small bar was an approved land use before applying for a licence would stymie the sector.

Association founder and liquor industry lawyer Dan Mossenson said prospective owners were currently able to apply for the certificate with the liquor licence application, potentially shaving months off approval times.

He said the changes would deter people who wanted to open a small bar at a time the scene was beginning to take off. "It's going to have an inhibiting factor and cause delays," Mr Mossenson said. "My intuition suggests that it's pressure from vested interests trying to defer or delay the process."

He said adding to problems was the reluctance of some councils to issue a zoning certificate before a development application was approved.

A Department of Racing, Gaming and Liquor spokesman said the director of Liquor Licensing's decision to accept applications without a zoning certificate had been for a predetermined two-year period to help the take-up of small bar licences.

"The initial two-year period has passed and small bar applications must now be accompanied by a section 40 certificate at the time of lodgement in line with all other licence applications," he said.

During the two years, applications could have been submitted without the certificate but would not have been determined until the document was produced.

Brendon Aitken, who opened the Cabin Wine Bar and Bistro in Mt Hawthorn last month, said the licensing process was already full of red tape. He believed it would be a tragedy if the changes deterred people from getting involved in the small bar scene.

Mr Aitken said Perth needed small, intimate venues as an alternative to bigger licensed venues.