

HB 669 Testimony

Luke Pierce

Law Bird - 740 S High St.

Chairman Hoagland and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in favor of House Bill 669.

My name is Luke Pierce, and along with my wife, I own Law Bird Bar. Law Bird is a craft cocktail and wine bar in the brewery district. Where we, along with our amazing staff, prepare off the wall cocktails, serve our favorite unique wines, and delicious foods. I've come here today to urge you to pass house bill 669 to help save my own business and dozens others like it all over Ohio affected by the covid-19 pandemic.

My wife and I have been in the restaurant business all of our working lives. We planned for years to open our own place, and after one of the most stressful years of our lives pitching our concept to investors, lining up a bank loan, and crowdfunding from our supporters, we managed to open the doors to Law Bird in the Brewery district on November 7th 2019. Our dream took putting everything we own on the line, but to be able to make our vision come to life, we'd do it all over again in a heartbeat.

For those of you who missed it, that date of our grand opening again was November 7th, 2019. A mere four months and a week before the mandated shut down. We had had a phenomenal four months. We'd been written up in one of the beverage industries leading national magazines Imbibe, as one of their 75 people, places, and things that'll shape the way you drink in 2020. We were also named as one of Esquire magazines "best bars in america" for 2020. Sales in our opening months were beyond expectations, and guests had raving reviews. We had succeeded in creating something special and bringing some national recognition to our hometown of Columbus. To state it simply, things were going well.

On March 15th 2020, a date forever etched in our minds, our world was turned upside down. The government mandated shut down brought an uncertain and undoubtedly dim future for our business and livelihood. The first month of lockdown was dark for us. We had no idea how to proceed in the immediate future, and certainly no idea how to continue to operate safely in the extended future. We knew a small intimate cocktail bar was not built for a global pandemic. We were then given a glimmer of light and a little bit of hope in the shape of to-go cocktails being temporarily legalized.

Once we were granted the ability to offer to-go cocktails, we got to work. Our job became planning a pivot of our business that we thought could help us survive the covid epidemic. It took almost a month and a half of planning to find and source bottles, design and print labels, and physically transform our bar into a brand new format - think wine shop meets 7-11, with a robust offering of to-go cocktails. We have altered the function of our 1400 square foot space drastically. Now, the front 300sq/ft of our bar has become a retail space, complete with false walls, six plus sets of shelving units, and an open faced cooler. The rest of our space, formerly a 17 seat bar and our tables seating an additional 28 guests, has become our office/production and bottling facility. A far cry from our cozy, funky bar we worked so hard to build. Our supporters have embraced our pivot, some coming in multiple times a week to buy to-go cocktails, unique wines, and snacks. We felt confident that we were able to keep our staff safe

as well as our guests in this new format, all while being able to generate the cash flow needed to keep our dream alive.

While to-go cocktails have helped keep our business afloat for now, we fear we will certainly sink if that option were to go away, even if things ever get back to some semblance of normal in the near future. The truth is, the restaurant and bar industry has been dealt a blow that many businesses will never recover from, and those who do, will be fighting for their recovery for years to come. HB 669 will help that recovery.

We believe bars and restaurants are critical places of community. Not only for our patrons, but for our staff too. The reality is that many bars and restaurants are only profitable because of their drink programs. Without cocktails right now, we wouldn't be able to welcome back the staff we have, or provide a community outlet for those seeking to do so safely. We also believe that to-go cocktails can be offered safely, and is no different than simply picking up beer, wine, or liquor at a gas station, grocery store, or state store. Here however, it supports our small business, our staff, and *our* community.

Timing is and was crucial for us. We were delayed in launching our carry-out program because we wanted to do it right from the beginning. We had to take an extra month to source safe packaging and labels. That was a lost month of potential revenue. If this becomes a permanent fixture - those months of uncertainty and having to figure out how to reinvent ourselves can be bypassed, knowing that this is a sustainable revenue source, a source of comfort and stability for the future of our industry - something we all crave right now.

The passage of HB 669 will give restaurants and bars a huge tool to aid in their economic recovery. The covid-19 pandemic will forever change the way people behave. Routines will change, and people will adapt to consume their favorite experiences in new ways. The restaurant and bar industry must be given the chance to adapt along with them.

Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chair Shaffer, Ranking Member O'Brien, and members of the committee, I thank you for your time today, and I urge you to pass House Bill 669 into law. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.