

## North Carolina's Updated Laws on Social Districts

In September 2021, Governor Roy Cooper signed into law House Bill 890 (HB 890) – ABC Omnibus Legislation – which passed both the House and Senate with bi-partisan support. Included in HB 890 was a provision allowing local governments to create social districts in North Carolina. The North Carolina Retail Merchants Association (NCRMA) was the major interest group pushing for the passage of this important legislation to drive foot traffic to downtown businesses and level the playing field for brick-and-mortar businesses with ABC permits. In a little less than a year since the enactment of HB 890, nearly twenty municipalities have successfully created social districts in towns as small as Norwood to cities as big as Greensboro. Numerous other cities are investigating the creation of social districts based on how successful the social districts have become with customers and businesses alike.

The passage of legislation creating social districts also resulted in some legal questions posed to the North Carolina Alcoholic Control Commission, Alcohol Law Enforcement, and local city attorneys.

In June 2022, House Bill 211 (HB 211) – Social District/Common Area Clarifications - passed both the House and Senate with bi-partisan support and was subsequently signed into law by the Governor on July 7, 2022. This legislation provides some much-needed clarity to the original social district legislation and includes more detail on the inter-workings of social districts.

The sections of the North Carolina General Statutes regulating social districts contained in HB 890 were repealed and replaced with a brand-new section of Chapter 18B to regulate social districts. However, any social districts created in 2021 remain in place. The information detailed below provides context on North Carolina's initial law allowing for the creation of social districts and clarifications to this law established via the recent passage of HB 211.

### What is a Social District?

A social district is a defined area in which a person may consume alcoholic beverages sold by an ABC permittee located within the social district. A social district may include both indoor and outdoor areas of businesses within or contiguous to the defined area during the days and hours set by the local government in creating the social district. A social district may include privately owned property, including permittees and non-permittee businesses, and multi-tenant establishments, as well as public streets, crosswalks, or parking areas whether the streets or parking areas are closed to vehicle traffic.

This revised definition clears up any confusion as to whether a social district can cross a public street or road and whether a social district may be created in a privately owned area of a local government jurisdiction, such as a shopping center. It also clarifies that a social district may include both indoor and outdoor areas of businesses within, or contiguous to, the defined area during the days and hours set by the local government. It should be noted that it is the sole decision of a business located within the geographic area of a social district whether to participate in the activities of the social district.

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## Who Can Designate a Social District?

Neither HB 890 nor HB 211 created a statewide social district, but instead allows cities and counties to “opt-in” to social districts via an ordinance.

- A city may adopt an ordinance designating an area within the municipal limits as a social district under G.S. 160A-205.4.
- A county may adopt an ordinance designating a social district from an area located outside a municipal boundary under G.S. 153A-145.9.
- Once created, a local government may also eliminate a social district by ordinance.
- HB 211 did clarify that a local government may create more than one social district within its jurisdiction.

## What are the Requirements for a City or County to Create a Social District?

- Social districts must be clearly defined, and signage must be posted in conspicuous locations indicating:
  - The geographic area included in the social district.
  - The days and hours during which alcoholic beverages can be consumed in the social district.
  - The telephone number for the ALE Division and Local Law Enforcement with jurisdiction over the social district.
  - A clear statement that an alcoholic beverage purchased for consumption in a social district shall:
    - only be consumed within the social district and
    - be disposed of before the person possessing the alcoholic beverage exits the social district unless the person is reentering the licensed ABC premises where the alcoholic beverage was purchased.
- Social districts are only allowed to operate during hours defined under G.S. 18B-1004:
  - From 7:00 am until 2:00 am Monday – Saturday; and
  - From Noon until 2:00 am on Sunday
    - If the local government has allowed for earlier Sunday Sales, a social district may operate beginning at 10:00 am on Sunday
- A local government creating a social district is required to establish management and maintenance plans for the social district and post these plans, along with a drawing of the boundaries and the applicable days and hours of the social district, on the local government’s website. A social district must be maintained in a manner that protects the health and safety of the general public.
  - Under HB 211, a local government is now authorized to delegate the management and maintenance of the social district to a private entity, such as a downtown development organization, local chamber of commerce or owner of a shopping center.
  - A local government may also establish guidelines in their social district allowing for suspension of regular days and hours of alcohol consumption in all or part of a social district during events requiring special events ABC permits.
- Before a social district can become operational, a local government must submit to the North Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Commission a detailed map of the social district with the boundaries clearly marked and the days and hours during which alcoholic beverages can be consumed (G.S. 18B-904.1(c)(3)).
  - The ABC Commission has created a specific form for a local government to submit this documentation and can be found here:
    - [NC ABC Commission Social District Registration Link](#)
  - A local government is only required to submit a revised map to the ABC Commission if the local government changes the geographic area of a social district. It should be noted that a local government is not required to identify the businesses or ABC permittees located within the social district or if there is a change in businesses located within the social districts that are participating in the social district.

- A local government is required to develop or approve uniform signs indicating that a non-permittee business is included in the social district and allows alcoholic beverages on its premises when the social district is active and distribute the signs to non-permittee businesses that are included in the social district.
  - The signs may be in the form of a sticker, placard, or other format as deemed appropriate by the local government.
  - A non-permittee participating in the social district and allowing alcohol on their premises is required to always display the uniform sign during the times when the social district is active.
  - A customer may not bring an alcoholic beverage into a non-permittee business that does not display the uniform sign.
  - A local government may now delegate the designing of signage, cups, and window clings to a private entity such as a downtown development authority, local chamber or property management group with the local government maintaining ultimate decision-making on these items.

### **Who Can Sell Alcohol in a Social District?**

A business holding any of the following ABC permits may sell alcohol to be consumed in a social district:

- 1) An on-premises malt beverage permit issued pursuant to G.S. 18B-1001(1).
- 2) An on-premises unfortified wine permit issued pursuant to G.S. 18B-1001(3).
- 3) An on-premises fortified wine permit issued pursuant to G.S. 18B-1001(5).
- 4) A mixed beverages permit issued pursuant to G.S. 18B-1001(10).
- 5) A distillery permit issued pursuant to G.S. 18B-1001(5).
- 6) A wine shop permittee issued pursuant to G.S. 18B-1001(16).

Special one-time permits: The ABC Commission may issue special one-time permits pursuant to G.S. 18B-1002(a)(2) or (a)(5) for events occurring on premises located partially or entirely within the boundaries of a social district. This was an important clarification to the social district law contained in HB 211 because some local governments questioned whether they could create social district in an area where the local government conducted annual festivals where alcohol was sold.

### **What Additional Rules Do ABC Permittees Have to Follow to Sell Alcohol Within a Social District?**

An ABC permittee must be located in or contiguous to the social district in which it is selling alcohol to be consumed.

The ABC permittee is only allowed to sell and serve alcoholic beverages on its licensed premises. In other words, the ABC permittee cannot sell alcoholic beverages in the street or down the street from its licensed premises just because the ABC permittee is located in, or contiguous to a social district.

Alcoholic beverages that are being sold to be consumed in a social district can only be sold in a container that meets all the following requirements:

- 1) The container clearly identifies the ABC permittee from which the alcoholic beverage was purchased.
- 2) The container clearly displays a logo or some other mark that is unique to the social district in which it will be consumed.
- 3) The container is not made of glass.
- 4) The container displays, in no less than 12-point font, the statement, “Drink Responsibly – Be 21.”
- 5) The container cannot hold more than sixteen fluid ounces.

A local government may now create its social district ordinance so an ABC permittee or non-permittee business may allow a customer to possess and consume on the business's premises alcoholic beverages purchased from any ABC permittee located in or contiguous to the social district.

- This is a major change from HB 890 enacted in 2021 which prohibited a customer who had purchased an alcoholic beverage from one ABC permittee to enter the premises of another ABC permittee located in the social district.

In summary, an ABC permittee in a social district is no longer prohibited from allowing a patron to enter their premises with an alcoholic beverage purchased at a different ABC permittee located within the social district if the local government chooses to write its social district ordinance to allow for this activity.

Another major policy change contained in HB 211 allows ABC permittee and non-permittee businesses in multi-tenant establishments to be included and participate in a social district. This allows for a social district to be created in an area that is privately-owned such as in a mixed-used shopping center which contains residential units as well as businesses that sell or do not sell alcohol.

### **If I am a Business in the Social District, but I Do Not Want Customers Coming into My Store with Alcoholic Beverages, Do I Have to Participate?**

No, any business without an ABC permit located in, or contiguous to, the designated social district has the option to participate, or not, in allowing customers with beverages to enter their premises. For example, Printers' Books may remain open during designated social district hours but decide to post a sign that alcoholic beverages (or any beverages) are not allowed in their store even if they are located inside of the social district.

Likewise, a business with an ABC permit located in, or contiguous to, the social district may decide to participate or not participate in allowing customers to leave their premises with an open container.

HB 211 contained several clarifying changes concerning this question, including:

- A participating non-permittee business is now required to always display the uniform sign during the times when the social district is active as to whether the business allows for patrons to enter their business with alcohol.
- All non-permittee businesses that are part of a social district and allow customers to bring alcoholic beverages onto their premises are required to clearly post signage on any exits that do not open to the social district indicating that alcoholic beverages may not be taken past that point.
  - As example, if a non-ABC permittee has two points of ingress and egress with one point entering and exiting into the social district and one entering and exiting into an area not in the defined social district the business would have to post signage warning their customers not to exit the business with alcohol into the area not contained in the social district. This is to prevent a patron from unknowingly possessing an open container of alcohol outside of the social district.
- During the days and hours when the social district is active, a non-permittee business that allows customers to bring alcoholic beverages onto its premises is required to allow law enforcement officers access to the areas of the premises accessible by customers.
- In a major policy change from HB 890, HB 211 allows an ABC permittee or a non-permittee to possess and consume on the business' premises alcoholic beverages purchased from any permittee located in the social district. HB 890 previously prohibited a local government from creating a social district that allowed an ABC permittee to allow a customer to bring an alcoholic beverage from a different ABC permittee onto their premises. G.S. 18B-300.1(f) allows an ABC permittee to allow a person to bring an alcoholic beverage purchased at a different ABC permittee onto their premises. Again, while this activity is allowed, the decision on whether to allow for this activity within a social district is up to the local government and how the local government determines to write their ordinance creating a social district.

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## **What Requirements Do Customers Have to Follow Within a Social District?**

A person can only possess and consume alcoholic beverages purchased from an ABC permittee located in, or contiguous to, the social district. A person cannot bring their own personal beer or wine into the social district for consumption.

A person, including a customer who is in possession of an open container of an alcoholic beverage, may possess alcoholic beverages in closed containers in a social district to the extent allowed by law (ex: a person can buy a beer to drink in the required social district cup and take a four-pack to consume at home from a bottle shop).

Any alcoholic beverages consumed in the social district must be consumed from the required container described above. In other words, a person cannot pour their wine or beer into a personal solo cup or any type of container other than the one meeting all the requirements for social districts.

Alcoholic beverages shall only be possessed and consumed in the social district during the days and hours set by the city or county. If a city designates an area as a social district from 9:00 pm until midnight on Friday and Saturday, a person cannot consume alcohol in the social district at 9:00 pm on Wednesday.

The sale and delivery of alcohol in a social district is subject to the same limitations for sales and deliveries of alcohol in North Carolina:

- No more than two malt beverages or wine drinks at one time to a single patron
- No more than one mixed beverage or spirituous liquor drink at one time to a single patron

A person is required to dispose of any alcoholic beverage in the person's possession prior to exiting the social district. In other words, if a person is leaving the social district area, they must pour out or throw away their alcohol.

## **Can Common Area Entertainment (CAE) Permits and Social Districts Co-Exist?**

In 2019, prior to the enactment of social district authorizing legislation, the General Assembly passed SB 290 – ABC Regulatory Reform Bill – that created a Common Area Entertainment (CAE) Permit. While individual tenants in multi-tenant establishments, like food halls, were already allowed to serve alcohol within their defined premises – the multi-tenant establishment did not have its own permit to allow customers to flow within the “common area” itself.

This new CAE permit allowed the property owner or property owner's association of a “multi-tenant establishment” with two or more alcohol-permitted businesses to have a designated consumption area on the property where individuals could purchase alcohol at establishments and take the open containers of this alcohol (including beer, wine, and spirituous liquor) in specially-designated cups off the designated premises of those businesses into a designated consumption area, or back onto the premises of a business, with permission of the business owner.

Fast-forward to the 2021 legislative session, when the legislature passed HB 890 authorizing local governments to pass ordinances to designate social districts whereby customers of businesses located contiguous to the social district could take open containers of alcohol (including beer, wine, and spirituous liquor) in specially-designated cups off the premises of an ABC permitted establishment and into any areas designated as part of the social district.

During the 2022 legislative session, HB 211 included clarifying provisions to answer questions that arose on the interaction of CAE permits and social districts such as:

- Could CAEs be issued to mixed-use developments that had private streets open to vehicular traffic?
- Can local governments pass ordinances designating social districts in mixed-use developments and/or privately-owned property?
- Can a social district and a special event permit work in tandem?

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HB 211 makes the following clarifications to the existing CAE and social district laws to address those questions:

- A mixed-use development may obtain a CAE that encompasses the development, including privately owned streets, sidewalks, and courtyards and does not have to restrict or close these areas through the delineation of vertical boundaries.
- A city or county may pass a social district ordinance that encompasses a mixed-use development and/or private property and may delegate management of that social district to the property owner or property owner's association.
- Various types of special event permits may act in conjunction with social districts, and cities/counties have flexibility to implement this process. For example, street festivals in a downtown area can operate in conjunction with a social district.
- Property owners and cities/counties have flexibility to implement management and maintenance plans, which include limiting hours of consumption, creating signage, and providing security.

The CAE permit will continue to be issued to the owner or property owners' association of a multi-tenant establishment, but a common area would be defined as "an indoor or outdoor portion of a multi-tenant establishment that is open to the public" and the permit holder can designate common areas to be "designated consumption areas" where consumption of alcoholic beverages is allowed.

The designated consumption area may include:

- Any indoor or outdoor area of a permittee business that is contiguous to a designated common area or
- Any indoor or outdoor area of a non-permittee business that is contiguous to the designated common area and that chooses to allow customers to bring open containers of alcoholic beverages onto its premises.

Additional requirements and clarifications involving a CAE Permit:

- A permittee can be included in the designated consumption area even if it chooses to exclude open containers of alcoholic beverages purchased from other permittees.
- Non-permittee businesses are not responsible for enforcing the alcohol laws but must allow law enforcement officers access to the areas of the premises accessible by customers.
- The designated consumption areas must be submitted to and approved by the ABC Commission and be marked in a way that clearly indicates to customers where the boundaries of the designated consumption area are located.
- Open containers sold by a permittee for consumption in a designated consumption area must be in a container meeting several criteria, and the possession of closed containers would be allowed to the extent otherwise allowed by law.