NEWS

"There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind."
C.S. LEWIS BRITISH AUTHOR

As downtown residents gripe, city seeks to restrict under-21 clubs

BY REETI MALHOTRA AND LARS WINKLER
STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Residents living near downtown bars and nightclubs that legally serve under-21 patrons non-alcoholic beverages say the establishments have caused fear, frustration and disrupted sleep.

In interviews with the News, three residents who live near the bars described nightlife around the clubs as more than an occasional inconvenience, saying that crowds, noise and violence have changed what it feels like to live downtown.

City officials are instituting a slew of legislative measures to crack down on the clubs that legally host people who are under 21, which are often called juice bars.

According to city officials, juice bars are designated areas within bars and nightclubs that legally serve minors non-alcoholic beverages. Often operating alongside all-ages events that also serve alcohol to patrons over 21, the improper management of these spaces — particularly when hosting large late-night events — has attracted thousands of youth and resulted in illegal alcohol sales to minors, disorderly conduct, fights, sexual assaults and shootings, Mayor Justin Elicker said at a press conference this month.

Elicker cited the fatal Halloween shooting of Norwich resident Alexa Acevedo as a particularly "tragic and egregious" example. Acevedo was killed during downtown festivities, many of which were held at juice bars, that attracted 7,000 to 10,000 attendees, the mayor said.



LARS WINKLER / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Residents and city officials have said juice bars, which legally serve non-alcoholic beverages to underage nightclub visitors, are causing poor quality of life and public safety issues downtown.

"We've had enough, and as a city, we are doing something to confront this problem," Elicker said.

Three specific violators of existing regulations are Gotham Citi Cafe, Rumaj Nightclub and Secrets, which together have been the sites of 250 calls for service and several citations in the past seven months, Elicker said.

In response to allegations of non-compliance, a spokesperson for Rumaj Nightclub who refused to provide a name, citing wishes for the statement to be on behalf of the whole staff, wrote in an email to the News that the establishment "fully complies with the City of New Haven's juice bar regulations on a weekly basis" and submits "all required notices" while maintaining "ongoing communication with the New Haven Police Department."

The spokesperson added that Rumaj is located "on one of the busiest streets in New Haven" and "directly across from the city's main public parking garage," which results in "significant concentration of foot traffic on Crown Street" that may be unrelated to the nightclub.

"Our priority remains safety, compliance, and responsible operation. We take these responsibilities seriously and believe our procedures reflect that commitment. We view ourselves as an asset to the downtown community and remain dedicated to providing a safe and enjoyable environment for all guests," the spokesperson wrote.

Gotham Citi Cafe and Secrets were unreachable by phone. When a reporter visited the two establishments, no one was available to comment on the accusations.

Residents living nearby described the issue as both a safety problem and a steady erosion of daily life. Ruth Yeazell GRD '71, a Yale professor who lives near Gotham Citi, said Friday nights can become "pretty horrible" because crowds leaving the nearby clubs can linger in the street until 2 or 3 a.m., shouting and playing music.

Yeazell said she loves living downtown and enjoys the energy of city life but that the atmosphere around the clubs has become increasingly difficult to tolerate. For Yeazell, the issue was not only about noise and disruption but also about safety, especially after the recent shootings.

Bill Dully, another nearby resident, said the impact has unfolded gradually, beginning with late-night noise and disorder and escalating into violence outside his building.

"It's affected us in layers," Dully said. "The first layer is simple quality of life."

He said residents have dealt with screaming, music and public disturbances on weekend nights, and argued that city officials should take stronger action against Gotham Citi.

Dully said residents living nearby have repeatedly tried to raise concerns with club management but felt that their efforts had gone unanswered.

Under current municipal ordinance, juice bars are only required to provide advance notice to the police chief's office before hosting an event. Failure to do so yields a penalty and fine, Elicker explained.

However, new proposed regulations, including a zoning ordinance akin to those placed on smoke shops and a state bill, aim to provide New Haven officials with "common sense tools to make existing juice bars safer and hold repeat violators accountable," Elicker said.

According to Elicker, the new zoning ordinance will prohibit new juice bars from opening.

Under the proposed bill, current juice bars will be required to adhere to limited hours of operation, which are currently 1 p.m. to 1 a.m. on weekday nights and up to 2 a.m. on weekend nights. Capacity will also be limited at juice bars, enabling law enforcement to reject or terminate a juice bar event due to available police capacity to manage mass crowd activities on the streets.

The sale of alcoholic beverages alongside and during juice bar operations will also be prohibited, with possible liquor license suspensions in the case of violation, according to Elicker.

The three juice bars are within three blocks of each other downtown. Rumaj and Secrets are neighbors on Crown Street, while Gotham Citi sits on nearby Center Street.

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Public library leaders seek more funds: 1 percent of city budget

BY NELLIE KENNEY
STAFF REPORTER

New Haven library leaders are calling for the Board of Alders to approve a proposed funding increase — and maybe a little more.

Mayor Justin Elicker's $733.3 million proposed budget includes around $5.7 million, or around 0.76 percent of the total, for the New Haven Free Public Library. The number represents an increase from the approximately $5.5 million allotted to the library this fiscal year, although a slight drop in terms of the percentage of the overall budget dedicated to the library. Many library leaders would like to see more funds.

"We do feel that our request this year for contractual services and personnel and our books line is really justified because our library is something New Haveners rely upon, and it is a heavily utilized resource," Maria Bernhey, the city librarian and the library system's director, said of the current proposed budget in a phone interview.

The library faces higher costs than it has in previous years, Bernhey said. One reason for the increase to the expected budget is that the city's longtime book distributor, Baker and Taylor, announced in September that it would be shutting down, she said.

Baker and Taylor's financial difficulties leading up to its closure meant that the library last year lost a longtime 40 percent discount on book purchases, Bernhey said, which created a "pricing challenge." That challenge coincided with "general inflation" and both rising costs and demand for digital library materials, Bernhey said.

The library also requested a bump in funding for contractual services, including security and utilities funding for Sunday hours, Bernhey said.

At a public hearing before the Board of Alders Finance Committee on March 31, three members of the library's board of directors testified in support of the budget — and called attention to the fact that it fell short of 1 percent of the city's total budget, which board member Lauren Anderson '99 said the board has been calling for it to reach "for years."

The 1 percent number traces back to a report created by Elicker's transition team in 2020 which crafted policy goals for his first term as mayor. The report suggested that the increase should be "implemented in stages as the City's financial status improves."

Library board member Giulia Gambale wrote in an email that "a budget of 1% of the total city budget will help NHFPL address rising costs of books, e-books and digital materials." She added that "NHFPL also needs to address staffing needs and maintenance costs to keep our library folk safe and comfortable."

Andrew Giering LAW '11, the president of the library's board of directors, also testified at the March budget hearing. He spoke in "strong support" of the library's proposed budget, he said, adding that "our library has many more needs than are reflected in the current budget."

Giering wrote in an email that it is "shameful that New Haven funds our Library at a piddling 0.76% of the General Fund," pointing to other cities in Connecticut, including Bridgeport and Hartford, which have allocated a higher percentage of their general funds to their libraries.

The budget proposed by Bridgeport's mayor for fiscal year 2027 would allocate about 2 percent of its general fund, or around $12 million, to the library. Hartford's budget for the 2025-2026 fiscal year allocates around 1.6 percent.

In a phone interview, Elicker rejected the notion that the library budget should be decided according to an "arbitrary percentage."

"I'm always working to make sure that as much as we can, we're providing resources for our community while also not increasing taxes to a point where residents can't afford to live in New Haven," he said. He added that the city has put more money into pensions and debt service, leading to an increase in the overall city budget which "makes the library percentage, even though it's increased significantly in actual dollars, look smaller."

Elicker said that his long-term goals for the library were "around programming," not "a random dollar amount."

These goals include increasing library hours and keeping the library open on Sundays, he said.

In a letter to the Board of Alders Finance Committee which she provided to the News, library board member Claudia Merson urged alders to "support the library's full request — and if the means exist, to go further."

"It is truly a library for all of us: the youngest children and the oldest adults, the "fancy" housed and the unhoused, the employed and those seeking work, longtime residents and those who have just arrived," Merson wrote. "Approving this budget request is an investment in the people of New Haven."

The New Haven Free Public Library opened in 1887, according to its website.

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ABBY ASSOUAD / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Mayor Justin Elicker's proposed budget for the coming fiscal year includes a bump in funding for the New Haven Free Public Library, but falls short of the goal — 1 percent of the total budget — that some library leaders have set.

State presents plan for Union Station platform and tunnel redesign

BY TAJRIAN KHAN
STAFF REPORTER

State officials presented major redesigns for New Haven Union Station's platforms and tunnels to 50 residents at a public information meeting at the New Haven Free Public Library's main branch on Tuesday.

The project is slated to cost $402 million and will be entirely funded by state and federal grants, Jonathan Kang, the project manager, said at the meeting. As part of the project, the train station's existing four platforms will be rebuilt and extended to allow for more train cars to stop at each platform. The existing canopies will be replaced with a single full coverage canopy system, which "eliminates the need for heated platforms," Kang added.

"The purpose of the project is to replace aging infrastructure, but while we are there, we also have the opportunity to provide better rail service to commuters and protect them from the heat and cold," he said.

Architectural leads from HNTB, the firm handling the project's design, showed renderings of the proposed central atrium with an arched truss canopy that will cover all four platforms along with "origami canopies" covering the length of each platform on either side.

"We have a contemporary design for the platforms without overshadowing the historic main structure," Zuhair Hussaini, the lead architect of the canopy structure, said. "The canopy will include skylights and curtain glass to allow natural light coming in from all sides."

"We're using a faux wood material throughout the entire platform, which gives a nice, inviting, and warm feeling to the entire space," Hussaini added. Faux wood — an aluminum panel with a wood-patterned print — is more durable and cost-effective while maintaining the warmth effect, he explained.

Matthew Casamassina, the lead architect of the tunnel redesign, also presented renderings of the proposed upgrades to the existing underground tunnel that connects the main building with the platforms.

"Our goal is to really open up the tunnel, maximize the ceiling height, open up floor space and provide ample lighting," Casamassina said. The new design uses lighter and darker colors in different parts of the tunnel to "improve wayfinding" for commuters, he said.

Construction will start in spring 2029, after necessary "signal improvements" are complete, Thomas Laliberte, a project manager from the engineering firm WSP, said.

"We will be taking one platform out of service at a time," Laliberte said. "The intention is to maintain the existing rail service."

As part of the redesign, the Connecticut Department of Transportation will add new "benches, vending machines, security cameras, blue light phones, signage, trash receptacles, shelters and wind-screens" to platforms and replace aging elevators with larger ones, Laliberte added.

Earlier this year, the department announced twin $113 million projects for upgrades to the State Street Station. Project representatives at the meeting also highlighted two other projects at Union Station: the $316 million mixed-use development on the station's east parking lot and proposed upgrades to the main building's interior.

Both Laliberte and Kang emphasized that all infrastructure in the station will be "brought up to code and latest ADA standards," referring to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

At the end of the presentation, two attendees asked if the improvements would result in faster trains in the northeast corridor.

"There are lots of ongoing projects at the department to make trains faster, but there are clearance issues in the entire corridor," Kang responded. "This will not save half an hour in travel time, but small improvements here and there will add up, and hopefully we will get there in the future."

New Haven Union Station was the 12th busiest station in the country in 2025, according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

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