

Gauteng Liquor Forum concerned about new bill

The Gauteng Liquor Forum (GLF), which is made up of 15 associations of mostly shebeens and taverns, and through these represents over 8 000 individual businesses, and approximately 24 000 employees, has reiterated its concerns over the proposed changes to the Gauteng Liquor Bill.

Of grave concern is the possibility that shebeen permits may not be extended following their expiry date in June 2012, which could sound the death knell for hundreds of small businesses across the province.

"While we respect and support the Gauteng government's commitment to fighting alcohol abuse, many of the proposed amendments to the liquor law are misguided and will have detrimental effects on the Gauteng economy in the long term," says GLF spokesperson Linda Madida.

Shebeen permits - although temporary legal documents - have been in operation in Gauteng since 2004 and grant liquor traders the right to trade. It is estimated that the Gauteng Liquor Board has issued about 15 000 shebeen permits in total, more than half of which are active in the market. In March this year, the Gauteng Economic Affairs MEC Qedani Mahlangu announced that shebeen permits that are about to expire would not be renewed, and that traders would need to apply for an official liquor licence to be allowed to trade.

Traders will be exploited by corrupt officials

"The majority of permit holders in Gauteng are women who are running subsistence businesses in order to school, clothe and feed their families," continues Madida. "They are now justifiably concerned that they will be grouped as illegal traders once their permits expire, as most of them are unable to cease trading until the significant bureaucratic delays in the processing of licences have been resolved. Moreover, this situation will create a mecca for corrupt law enforcement agents to exploit these venerable small traders."

With the promulgation of the new Act, permit holders will have been given three months to apply for licences. "This timeline is virtually impossible to meet," explains Madida. "The average time it takes for prospective applicants to prepare the documentation is about ten months, which is primarily due to the local municipal consent or zoning certification required with regard to land use policies."

Since 2004 when the permits were first introduced, many shebeen owners have invested in their structures to ensure that they are compliant with the provisions of the Act. Several have also applied for licences but most were declined due to absence of municipal consent approval. In the words of one shebeen owner, Thabo Modise: "We feel it is unfair that the government granted us the permission to trade and are now taking it away again without resolving the core issue that led to the issuing of the permits to begin with: the complexity of the licensing process and the costs and challenges associated

with obtaining municipal consent or zoning."

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