

# Will 'cabaret' play in Rockford?

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Rockford's central business district has on weekends.

"It was really wonderful," he said. "There was plenty of life going on downtown."

## '24-hour-a-day city'

Wright said his research has found more than a dozen Illinois cities that allow later liquor sales than Rockford. Machesney Park repealed its 3 a.m. weekend closings this year.

He called it unreasonable to require taverns and restaurants here to shut down at 2 a.m. when grocery stores, Laundromats, gas stations and manufacturing plants operate around-the-clock. Downtown nightlife, he said, could thrive on second-shift factory workers alone.

"This is a 24-hour-a-day city," he said.

Wright is owner of The Office, 513 E. State St., a nightclub he has operated for eight years.

The city has issued 28 liquor licenses in the area straddling State Street and extending from Seventh Street to Kilburn Avenue. The businesses include bars, restaurants, the MetroCentre and New American Theater.

Merchants are excited about the idea of being part of a late-night cabaret district.

"I think it's a fabulous idea," said Fifth Precinct owner Mark Palmeri. "Downtown needs something."

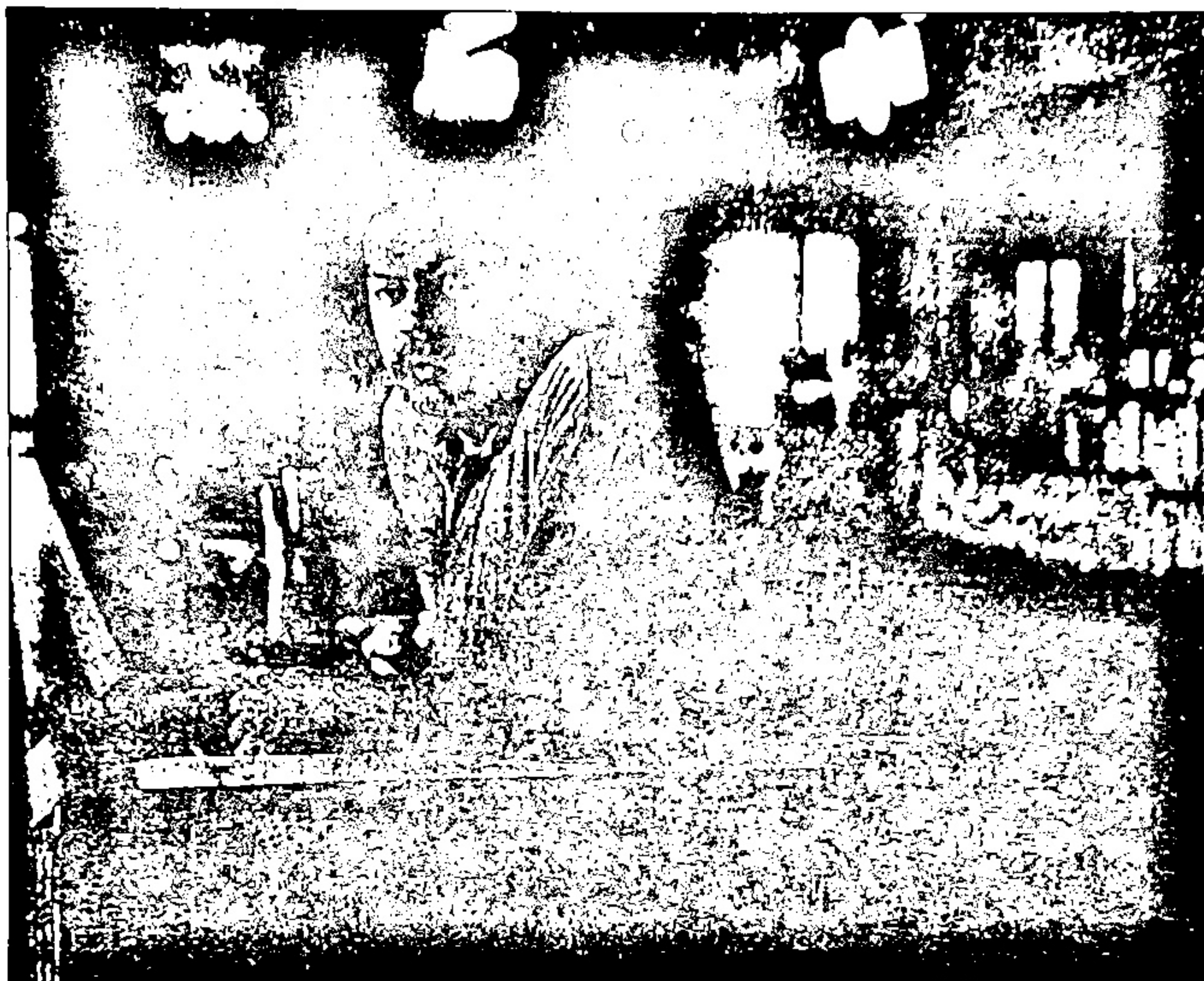
## Behind the times

Ted Coleman, owner of the Brickhouse Lounge on South Main Street, said he would favor introducing 4 a.m. taverns in Rockford. "We're way behind" other Illinois cities, he said. "We're chasing little bitty cities instead of little bitty cities chasing us."

MetroCentre general manager Brad Walsh figures that a downtown cabaret would draw bigger crowds to the civic center and possibly attract new restaurants and taverns. He said city leaders have long recognized culture and entertainment as key elements to revitalizing downtown.

"We'd be in favor of any kind of proposal that would generate more nighttime activity," he said.

In the late 1980s, City Hall cre-



L.E. BASKOW/Rockford Register Star

Ted Coleman, owner of the Brickhouse Lounge, says he would favor a 4 a.m. closing time for Rockford bars. "We're way behind other cities," he said.

ated a special downtown tax district to raise \$130,000 a year for preserving and developing the central business corridor. The resulting Rockford Central Area Corp. labored 10 years before property owners petitioned to abolish the agency this summer, saying they got nothing for their higher tax bills.

The RCAC leaves a legacy of unfulfilled dreams, including one to transform downtown into an entertainment corridor.

When a similar idea surfaced in Peoria, some community leaders were concerned that a 4 a.m. entertainment district would bring more crime downtown. With a 6 a.m. starting time, downtown taverns are open 22 hours a day.

## More police patrols

Police Chief John Stenson said the department has focused more resources downtown and has

experienced no significant new problems. Stenson sees intensified police patrols as a fair trade-off for boosting downtown tourism and commerce.

"People want something to do on the town," he said. "There's probably more good in it than bad."

Rockford city officials have rejected several attempts to extend tavern hours, including a 1995 proposal to stay open until 3 a.m. Fridays and 4 a.m. Saturdays.

The most recent defeat came this year when the city council voted down a plan to move the Sunday starting time from 11 a.m. to 8 a.m. to accommodate brunch crowds.

Ald. Frank Beach, R-10th, one of the council's most outspoken tavern critics, said the cabaret idea probably would lead to 4 a.m. liquor sales citywide as other bars

and restaurants see business heading downtown.

"That's a kind of precedent I wouldn't be willing to support," he said.

Proponents of the cabaret district have been working for weeks to line up support before deciding whether to submit the request to City Hall.

## Talks in early stages

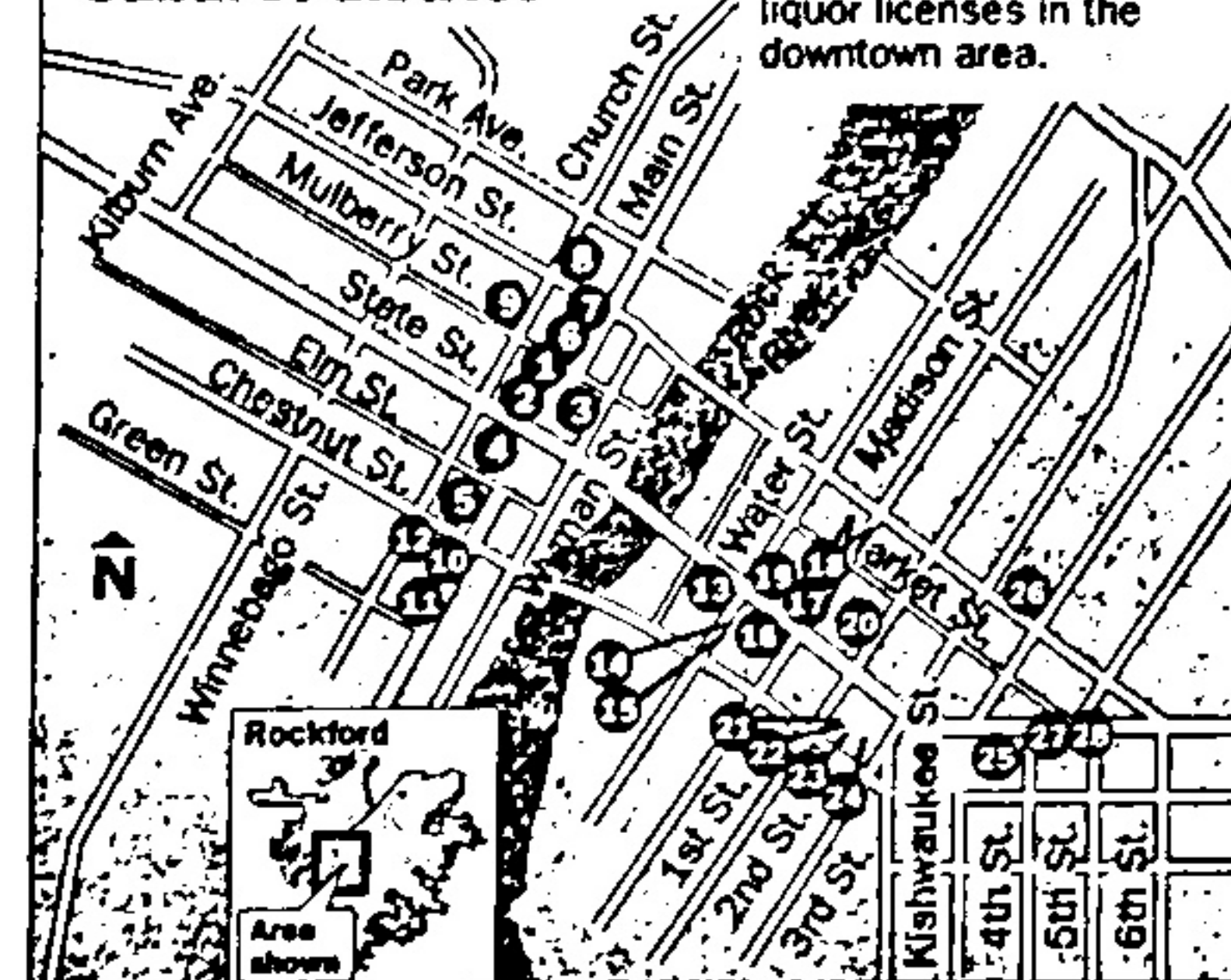
Wright, who led the 1995 push for later nighttime bar hours, is serving his first year as president of the local liquor retailer association.

The group has about 150 members throughout the region.

David Castegnaro, the business group's attorney, said he is working to build enthusiasm within the tavern industry while selectively approaching community leaders about the issue.

He said discussions are in rela-

## Cabaret district



The city has issued 28 liquor licenses in the downtown area.

Rockford Register Star

1. Octane Interlounge
2. New American Theater
3. Cafe Esperanto
4. Herb Garden Cafe
5. Metro Center
6. Serrano's Afta Deck
7. Dante's Inferno
8. Times Lounge
9. Swilligan's Pub
10. Fifth Precinct
11. Tom's Tap
12. Auto Inn
13. Hideaway
14. State & Madison Billiards
15. Hop's Bar & Deli
16. Capri Restaurant
17. Surf Lounge
18. American Cafe
19. C.J.'s Lounge
20. United Auto Workers
21. Little Italy
22. The Office
23. Bacchus Wine Bar
24. Irish Rose Saloon
25. Ross' Restaurant
26. Rue Marche
27. Oasis Lounge
28. Big Cities Lounge

## What do you think?

Should downtown become a "cabaret district" open until 4 a.m.? Would you come downtown more often and stay later? Or would the arrangement create problems?

To register your opinion this weekend, call the Rockford Register Star comment line, 987-1293. Or send us a fax, 987-1365.

Please include your full name, the city where you live and a day-

time phone number so we can verify your message. Your phone number will not be published.

## What's next

The local chapter of the Illinois Licensed Beverage Association will consider the cabaret-district idea at a membership meeting Dec. 8 at The Office nightclub, 513 E. State St. The meeting is not open to the public.

tively early stages.

"It would take a united effort — and some politicking," he said.

One group approached for support is River District, the downtown-advocacy group that sponsors the annual Heart of Rockford awards.

The group has not taken a position on the cabaret idea, which Executive Director Patty Rinehart said could become "a political football."

She said one potential stumbling block could be averted if proponents agree to limit the number of downtown taverns with exotic dancers. Rockford has at least three; Peoria has one.

Rinehart said she supports continuing to research the concept as long as there are some controls.

"The idea has great potential," she said. "It would be a hot potato, but I don't think we should back away for that reason."