

# Will 'cabaret' play in Rockford?



L.E. BASKOW/Rockford Register Star

Mike Wright, owner of The Office, surveys the 500 block of East State Street Friday. The president of the Downtown Liquor Retailers Association wants the city to create a downtown cabaret district allowing bars and clubs to remain open and serve alcohol until 4 a.m.

## District in downtown Peoria has civic leaders talking

By **SCOTT WILLIAMS**

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**ROCKFORD** — Downtown could let the good times roll until 4 a.m. if tavern owners are able to sell community leaders on the idea of creating a "cabaret district."

Modeled on reforms that have pumped life into Peoria's central business district, the concept would allow taverns, restaurants and other downtown businesses to stay open two hours longer than now permitted.

Proponents say the idea is certain to draw opposition, considering how vehemently

City Hall has refused requests to authorize extended tavern hours citywide. But the notion of limiting the late-night revelry to a relatively small geographic area has civic leaders intrigued.

Wendy Perks Fisher, executive director of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, said 4 a.m. liquor sales have helped transform Peoria's downtown into a successful nighttime entertainment district.

"It certainly would be worth looking at," she said. "We've got to consider everything if we're going to revital-

ize our downtown."

Officials of the local liquor retailers association might decide in the next few weeks whether to pursue the concept. They have spent the past couple of months quietly doing research and lobbying for support.

Ald. Leonard Jacobson, D-6th, a longtime supporter of the tavern industry, is skeptical about whether opponents of expanded liquor sales could be persuaded to embrace the cabaret district.

"That's a new twist," Jacobson said. "But just because it works in Peoria does not

mean it would work here."

Rockford community leaders have spent years searching for the right formula to boost downtown business, considering such initiatives as riverboat gambling, a convention hotel and a theater district.

There have been recent signs of progress, with a sudden spurt in restaurant development and a \$14 million plan to resurrect the Coronado Theater.

The cabaret concept has been under consideration since September, when a state convention in Peoria gave tav-

ern and restaurant owners a glimpse of downtown nightlife in that central Illinois city of 115,000.

In 1990, Peoria city officials established a mile-long district on the banks of the Illinois River for 4 a.m. liquor licenses. Nineteen taverns and restaurants are part of the late-night scene.

Mike Wright, president of the Rockford chapter of the Illinois Licensed Beverage Association, said conventioners saw more activity on weeknights in September than

Please see **Cabaret**, 7A▷