Raves Reviewed
An Extended Dance Event Bylaw

by Sylvia Hunter

The past three years have seen a change in the nature of raves in Calgary. With more frequent events and larger attendance numbers, raves have become relatively “mainstream.” The cost of organizing them has increased to the point that smaller events (under 200 attendees) may not be economically feasible.

Today, a large rave promoter may reap considerable profits. Therefore, what began as a small counterculture movement has grown into a business activity. And as with any form of business involving people, activities and public places, the municipality is responsible for the safety and protection of people and property. Its legal means of meeting this responsibility is the enactment of a local municipal bylaw.

In Calgary, the Extended Dance Event Bylaw (#34M2000) was established to ensure that raves are safe for participants and not unduly disruptive to surrounding neighbourhoods.

The bylaw stipulates that an “extended dance event” license is required for each and every rave event held in Calgary. Promoters or persons responsible for putting on a rave are required to complete an application form for each event that has an expected attendance of 250 persons or more. Applications must be submitted to Calgary’s Business License Division forty-five days prior to the event, accompanied by a non-refundable license application fee. A team of municipal and community representatives then reviews the application. If it is denied, an appeal process may take place.

Issues associated with raves
Raves in Calgary typically occur in warehouses, sports arenas, community centres, entertainment centres, unoccupied commercial spaces, and in some cases on athletic fields. Unlicensed rave events run the risk of being held in venues that do not meet fire-code regulations, land-use designations, parking requirements, or regulations stipulating amenities for the health and safety needs of the participants, such as access to uncontaminated water and first-aid personnel. Moreover, because there is no prior warning that an event will be taking place, unlicensed raves limit the ability of police and emergency medical services to adequately schedule resources. Such circumstances often overburden resources when these services are repeatedly “called out” to a poorly operated event.

Other issues associated with unlicensed events include inadequate security staff and the inability of police and other authorities to patrol and investigate criminal and provincial offences. City of Calgary protection services staff involved with the rave industry suggest that unlicensed events result in an increased risk of noise disturbances to local residents, vandalism and excessive garbage, as well as in a larger number of calls to police and medical services.

Lessons learned while developing Calgary’s rave bylaw
Investigation and consultation with representatives of the municipality, the province and the community involved in raves shaped the context of the bylaw and continue to influence how it is implemented and monitored. The findings produced by such investigation and consultation can be summarized in the following way.

Rave culture is not necessarily homogeneous in its makeup. Differences range in age, gender, ethnicity, religious and political beliefs, as well as in educational attainment and employment experiences. Common to all its facets is electronic or “techno” music; diversity occurs in the types of electronic or “techno” music played (for example, “house,” “tribal,” “hard core”) and the audiences attracted to the various styles. Therefore, the diversity of rave culture is to be respected along with the concerns of Calgarians as a whole.

Current bylaws established to meet the safety and security needs of Calgary’s entertainment industry do not adequately pertain to the safety and security needs of rave events. For example, health concerns raised by prolonged exposure to high sound levels during the course of an all-night event, by dehydration and physical exhaustion from excessive dancing, and by lack of access to noise relief and non-tampered water, do not require the same level of attention in other entertainment sectors.

An outright ban on raves would only serve to move them underground, making them more secretive and likely to be conducted in unsafe environments. The result of this sort of action would shatter the positive relationship that has begun to develop with rave organizers, and would not address the concerns of neighbourhood residents.

Prudent and legitimate event-planning needs to ensure the health and safety of rave attendees, the quality of life of local residents and the adequacy of venues, security, and emergency medical provisions. As part of this process, police security checks are required to ensure the credibility of promoters or persons responsible for putting on events.

The municipal service-related costs to enact a rave bylaw needs to be considered. These costs involve police, fire and emergency medical services in: (a) responding to criminal matters associated with raves that are beyond municipal jurisdiction; (b) reviewing applications; and (c) providing resource support during the event. To charge the applicant a service fee to cover these costs would be prohibitive. Therefore, any service fee levied to the applicant needs to subsume some of these costs within reason.

The results of Calgary’s rave bylaw
Comments from some of the police officers, patrons and promoters who have attended licensed raves suggest that the presence of police deters drug traffickers and sexual predators. Notwithstanding, a number of pay duty officers have commented on the need to increase police presence at events to ensure the safety of the officers as well as the patrons.

Likewise, it is the opinion of emergency medical services that paramedics should be required at large events, and that recognized medical services should be available at all events.

Bylaw services officers, who monitor sound levels both inside and outside the
event facility (particularly with regard to nearby residential areas), have found the sound readings at most events to be within acceptable levels. And most promoters have complied with officers’ requests to lower sound levels when required. However, as with any large public function, a challenge that has not been solved is the noise associated with vehicles leaving a facility after an event. In the case of rave events, vehicular noise peaks between 6 and 8 a.m.

Members of the rave community, particularly event promoters, have raised two concerns as a result of the bylaw’s enactment. The first of these involves the cost of providing pay duty officers. Pay duty officers are assigned at the time an application is being processed. The number of officers assigned to an event is based on police assessment of officer and participant safety. Because these officers are working “off shift duty,” they are entitled to overtime wages. The cost of their time is charged to the applicant. The second concern is related to the difficulty of complying with the forty-five-day application deadline, which has made the cost of staging “medium-sized” events (500–1,000 people) prohibitive. The event promoters would like to see the bylaw relaxed so that it would not apply to events with fewer than 500 participants. Moreover, the promoters have expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the city regulates their events while other entertainment providers, such as “after hours” clubs, do not face the same regulatory attention. The promoters have suggested the bylaw be amended to reflect graduated levels of regulation dependent upon the number of people in attendance.

Another important issue has to do with the public perception of raves. For example, the rave community has reported that finding venues for their events is difficult, and that the cost of insuring their events has risen dramatically. It has also expressed concern that media reporting on raves focuses too heavily on drug use and negative stereotypes.

As of May 2001, thirty-three applications for an “extended dance event” licence were issued. Two of these applications were refused (one of which was appealed to the License Appeal Board, which upheld the refusal). Seven charges have been laid pursuant to violations of the conditions stipulated in the bylaw. These matters are still before the criminal division of the Provincial Court, with the verdicts not expected until the spring of 2002.

Before any amendments to the bylaw are made, further research is required:

- To assess other municipalities’ experiences with regulation;
- To determine whether other jurisdictions have faced similar complaints about their bylaws, and whether other legislative solutions can work in the Calgary context; and
- To determine the financial impact on the rave industry as a result of compliance with the bylaw.

City council has requested that a report be presented in the spring of 2002 addressing the outcome of the court hearing along with the investigation in other jurisdictions.

Signs of success
Although Calgary’s Extended Dance Event Bylaw is still new, city administration involved in writing and overseeing the bylaw believes that it is meeting its objectives. Yet the integrity of the bylaw has yet to be tested in either the courts or, to a significant degree, before the License Appeal Board.

Calgary is the first major municipality in Canada to pass a bylaw respecting raves. Edmonton and Victoria are now following suit, developing rave bylaws for their respective communities.

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Summary
As the rave community in Calgary grew from a small counterculture movement to a mainstream business activity, the City of Calgary enacted a bylaw to address issues associated with the rave events taking place in its neighbourhoods. The purpose of the bylaw is two-fold: to ensure that raves are safe for participants and not unduly disruptive to surrounding neighbourhoods. Consultation and investigation with representatives from the municipality, the province and the community involved in raves shaped the context of the bylaw, and continue to influence how it is implemented and monitored. Calgary is the first major municipality in Canada to pass a bylaw respecting raves.

Sommaire
Le mouvement «Rave» de Calgary, initialement clandestin, est maintenant un phénomène commercial important. La ville a dû adopter une réglementation pour gérer ces événements sur son territoire. La réglementation prévoit d’assurer la sécurité des participants et faire en sorte que les événements ne soient pas trop perturba teurs pour les communautés où ont lieu les «Raves». Des représentants de la province, de la ville et de la communauté «Rave» ont collaboré à l’élaboration de la réglementation et assurent un suivi. La ville de Calgary est la première municipalité importante au Canada à adopter une réglementation concernant les «Raves».