

# Board suspends Countryside Inn liquor license for 60 days

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After a three-hour public hearing that left Countryside Inn owner Rich Erdman shaking his head, members of the Milton Town Board voted unanimously on Thursday, Feb. 20 to suspend Erdman's liquor license for 60 days, effective March 2 at 12 a.m.

Before a judgment could be handed down, Milton Town Board members were charged with proving Erdman violated state statute by maintaining a "disorderly or riotous, indecent or improper house."

During the hearing, board members heard testimony from Erdman, Rock County Sheriff's Office Captain Jude Maurer, Rock County Sheriff's Officer Christopher Hasseler

and Town of Milton Police Department Officer Robert Wolf regarding problems that have cropped up at Countryside Inn as a result of hip hop parties.

According to Maurer, deputies responded to calls for an attempted homicide at Countryside Inn on June 22, 2013. A suspect, Trevonne McClam of Madison was arrested for allegedly shooting Terry Rice of Fitchburg three times.

About a month later, Maurer said deputies were once again deployed to Countryside and observed two alcohol violations: open alcohol containers in patrons' vehicles and patrons engaging in bottle service.

The final piece of evidence-which ironically enough has produced little tangible physical evidence-was the

alleged shooting at Countryside Inn on Jan. 26.

In his sworn statement, Maurer told Milton Town Board members that deputies were deployed to assist with getting people out of the bar after 2 a.m. following another hip hop event and twerking party at Countryside Inn. Deputies reported witnessing multiple fights break out, although no punches were thrown and no arrests were made.

At the same time, a performer Erdman had brought in from Chicago to perform was waiting in the basement for the crowd to thin out when they heard what sounded like gunshots and called 911.

Although the deputies inside the building did not report hearing gunshots, Maurer said the Rock County

Sheriff's Office dispatch received a call about an hour later, at 3:25 a.m. from Dane County, stating a man was being treated for a gunshot wound to the leg at Madison Meriter Hospital, and that he reported being shot at a Milton bar, although Countryside was not specifically named.

During his cross-examination, Erdman's attorney, Michael Murray, focused on the characterization of the fights that took place and the lack of evidence to prove the shooting took place at Countryside Inn.

When Murray questioned whether Erdman's video cameras showed the shooting, which allegedly took place just outside the front door, Maurer said a search warrant for the video

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# Countryside hearing

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camera revealed the video was darkened and had no images whatsoever—a statement which Erdman claimed was false in his testimony.

During Murphy's cross-examination of Hasseler, the officer stated he did not witness any of the patrons throw a punch, but rather there was a lot of pushing and shoving. Hasseler also said he did not see any evidence of gunfire.

Although no punches were thrown, Hasseler also told board members that he would consider the pushing and shoving that took place as a fight.

After Wolfe was called to the stand and sworn in, he testified that while no arrests were made from any of the fights, it was not because they did not rise to the level of an arrestable offense, but rather because he did not want to remove himself from the immediate area.

After approximately two hours of testimony from law enforcement personnel, Erdman himself was called to the stand, and the bar owner said he took additional precautions after the June shooting to prevent any further problems, including hiring 15 bouncers, four armed security personnel and Wolf to ensure patrons' safety.

"I had every door covered, the stage covered. There were people by the bathroom, by the bar, so any problems created was from the big storm and they were very reluctant to leave," Erdman said.

Erdman said when the June shooting occurred, it happened approximately 150 feet from his front door, yet people inside heard the shots. During the alleged shooting on Jan. 26, which supposedly happened five feet from his front door, no one, not even security personnel on scene, heard the shots.

In spite of Erdman's insistence that his bar provides a safe environment for his employees and patrons, and his attorney's argument that one confirmed incident (the June 2013 shooting) in eight years does not constitute a disorderly or riotous house, board members unanimously felt the burden of proof was met, allowing

them to suspend or revoke Erdman's liquor license.

"I think due to the fact we had two alleged shootings—one for sure and one alleged-fights inside the bar and a hit and run outside the place, I would say it is disorderly and one of the things stated on here," board member Marian Trescher said.

Fellow Milton Town Board member Beth Drew also pointed to Wolf's testimony that he did not want to remove himself from the bar to make an arrest due to concern for the patrons' safety as further proof of a riotous atmosphere.

"With all of the bars we have, we have to maintain good order and rapport with the neighbors around," Trescher added.

With members of the town board in agreement discipline was warranted, the only part that caused conflict was how the disciplinary measure should be carried out.

State statute grants municipalities the authority to revoke a liquor license or suspend a license for a period of 10-90 days.

Town board member John Traynor made a motion to suspend Erdman's liquor license for 30 days, effective Sunday, March 2 at 12 a.m. Prior to a decision being made, Erdman's attorney informed town board members that Madison County

would be performing at Countryside Inn this Friday, Feb. 28. Murphy told board members that the performance is the biggest of the year for Erdman and requires minimal security for the 30 and 40 year olds who typically come, and requested any discipline take effect after the event, which board members honored.

Town board member Leonard Stalker wanted a steeper penalty than Traynor's motion for a 30-day suspension. Instead, Stalker said if Erdman was to have his liquor license suspended, it should be for the maximum 90 days. However, Town Board Chair Bryan Meyer pointed out that with liquor licenses up for renewal in May, the full suspension would not allow Erdman sufficient time to present a business model to review before renewal.

With a second on Traynor's motion up in the air, Meyer seconded the motion to allow for further discussion.

Drew said she was in favor of Traynor's 30-day motion, but did not second it because she wanted it to take effect on March 1 instead of March 2.

Instead, members of the town board voted to split the difference and suspend Erdman's license for 60 days.



**Countryside Inn owner Rich Erdman (right), had his liquor license suspended for 60 days, following a Milton Town Board hearing on Feb. 20. Although Erdman's attorney, Michael Murray (left), contested the lack of physical evidence tying an alleged Jan. 26 shooting to Countryside Inn, board members voted unanimously that Erdman's establishment meets the qualifications for a "disorderly or riotous" house.**

(Edgerton Reporter photo/Rachel Wittrock)