Beer Gardens Helping Milwaukee County Budget

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In this photo taken on Aug. 20, 2014, Scott Johnson, left, Andrew Geisler and Matthew Dusenberry enjoy oversized glass mugs of beer at Estabrook Park Beer Garden in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee County parks department has started three static outdoor beer gardens and one traveling one, as some parks departments nationwide are starting to embrace once-banned alcohol to shore up their budgets. **(AP Photo/Carrie Antlfinger)**

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Oversized mugs of beer clink together as drinkers sitting under a canopy of trees in a Milwaukee public park listen to live accordion music and proclaim "Prost!" — the German equivalent of "cheers."

It's a scene that harkens back 150 years, when Germans brought breweries and beer gardens to the city, until Prohibition shut the gathering spots down in the early 20th century.

But traditional beer gardens are back in Milwaukee County, as some parks departments nationwide are starting to embrace once-banned alcohol to shore up their budgets. And regulars at the Estabrook Park Beer Garden in Milwaukee love that they can bring their picnic baskets of snacks to the lines of tables along the Milwaukee River and enjoy drinks in the short-lived warm summer air.

"This is our Regal Beagle if you will," said 36-year-old salesman Andrew Geisler, referring to the bar in the television show "Three's Company."

Rich Dolesh, vice president for conservation and parks at the National Recreation and Parks Association, said many parks departments still ban alcohol, but have eased the rules for festivals, concerts, golf courses and weddings.

What's new is making beer or wine a prominent feature of an ongoing event, he said.

"It's fair to say it's unusual, but it's the coming trend," he said.

In Charleston County, South Carolina, the parks department makes about $4,000 for each Yappy Hour in the summer, which involves dogs, bands, and wine and beer. That kind of creative thinking has helped more than double the parks budget to $48 million in the last 10 years without raising taxes, said Tom O'Rourke, executive director of the county's Park and Recreation Commission.

"If the government doesn't get into the beer or alcohol business, it's not like it's not going to happen," he said. "The same events are going to go on and the outside vendors are going to make the profit."

Word of Milwaukee County's beer garden success is catching on, with the parks department receiving inquiries from Atlanta, Seattle and Cleveland. The parks director is speaking about beer in parks in October at the National Recreation and Parks Conference.

County officials estimate that from the time the first garden started in 2012 through the end of this season in September, they will have brought in $560,000 for the county.

"None of us are getting as much (revenue) as we used to," said County Executive Chris Abele. "And we don't want to just pass costs onto taxpayers."

Beer gardens weren't terribly hard for people to accept in Milwaukee County, which has one of the highest numbers of people with German ancestry in the country. While the big breweries moved years ago, beer is still ingrained here, with smaller breweries like Sprecher Brewing Co. Not to mention the Milwaukee Brewers play in a stadium called Miller Park.

Some were worried about public drunkenness before the first garden started in 2012, but sheriff's department spokeswoman Fran McLaughlin said the county has not had any citations or arrests associated with beer gardens.

"I think we've clearly demonstrated that this is a family-friendly community place, and it's not a place of drunken debauchery," said Hans Weissgerber III, the owner of a German restaurant who runs the Estabrook beer garden.

He approached the county for five years in a row before they decided to create beer gardens. He got the idea from Germany, where some vendors pay the government rent for beer gardens in parks. Beer is so embraced there that it's common to see someone legally drinking a cold one on the subway.

Another traveling beer garden will start next summer in Milwaukee-area parks, and Abele is open to more. And if they end up making enough, the revenue could spill over to other county budgets, he said.

"Milwaukeeans love to get together and celebrate, and it's not a little bit more than most people — it's a lot more," Abele said.

**Associated Press Writer David Rising in Berlin and Researcher Judith Ausuebel in New York contributed to this report.*

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