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Bill would allow guns in churches, schools, bars, stadiums

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Tuesday, May 1, 2012



Those licensed to carry a concealed weapon on the streets for protection would be allowed to arm themselves in churches, schools, bars and stadiums under a bill making its way through the state Senate.

The legislation expands upon the “shall issue” law adopted by the Legislature in 2001, which expanded the right to carry a pistol to anyone who cited self-defense needs and was free of a criminal record.

That landmark bill was sponsored by Mike Green, a Mayville Republican, when he served in the House. Now, as a state senator, he is pushing for an end to “gun-free zones” for gun carriers, if they receive an additional nine hours in training.

The bill would permit those with the prescribed higher level of skill to carry a concealed pistol in several previously restricted areas:

- Day care centers
- Schools
- Sports arenas and stadiums

- Bars and taverns
- Hospitals

- College campuses, dorms and buildings

- Churches and other places of worship

The legislation enjoys strong support from gun rights groups while it faces intense opposition from many institutions and companies currently inoculated by the gun-free zones.

Steve Dulan, a board member and spokesman for the Michigan Coalition for Responsible Gun Owners, said the bill is intended to give people the right to defend themselves with firepower in heavily populated areas, such as stadiums and campuses, and also to deter criminal elements from attempting a gun crime in the restricted zones. An adjunct professor at Cooley Law School, Dulan playfully tells his students that current restrictions inadvertently provide “mass murder empowerment zones.”

“While law-abiding citizens obey these laws, the criminals literally don’t care, so restrictions like this only affect those law-abiding citizens,” Dulan said.

Mike Boulus, executive director of the President’s Council, which represents Michigan’s 15 public universities, said he believes gun rights groups are seizing upon a few mass shootings at campuses, schools and churches to argue that the solution is more guns in more hands. Boulus cautioned that college campuses are largely devoid of gun crimes, with a homicide rate that is 81 times less than in the general population.

A similar non-violent atmosphere prevails at hospitals, day care centers, and most schools and churches, he added.

“This is the annual walk-the-plank for the NRA (National Rifle Association), which is what the legislators are being asked to do,” Boulus said. “I ... just don’t see how we can prevent another Virginia Tech, I really don’t.”

That was a reference to the 2007 shooting rampage on the Virginia Tech campus in which a single gunman shot and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others, marking the worst massacre of its kind in U.S. history.

Under the Senate bill, private property owners, such as proprietors of a bar or day care center, could continue to ban guns if they post those restrictions prominently at their facilities. But public property, such as county hospitals and public schools, would have no authority to maintain gun-free zones.

The legislation would also eliminate county gun boards, giving authority over granting and renewing concealed pistol licenses to county sheriffs. At the same time, the Michigan Sheriffs Association is among the opponents of the measure.

The bill, which was adopted by a Senate committee on the same March day when it was introduced, is awaiting a vote on the Senate floor.

Doreen Hankins, owner of Detroit Arms, a firearms instruction company in Chesterfield Township, said she already has lined up a trainer and created a course outline – six hours in the classroom, three hours on the shooting range, as the bill requires – for a price of \$130. So far, only a dozen customers have expressed interest prior to the legislation receiving final approval.

Hankins said Detroit Arms will teach trainees how to assess a situation, how to properly draw a weapon in a crowded area, how to engage an attacker, and how to plan a shot.

“This is for your own protection, it’s not to keep watch over an area like the Wild, Wild West,” Hankins explained, adding that deterring criminals or agitators from firing a shot may be the bill’s most effective feature. “They may think twice about drawing their weapon. That’s just the nature of the beast.”

The Michigan Catholic Conference has sent more than 500 messages opposing the bill to the Senate from Catholics in the group’s “legislative network.” According to spokesman Dave Maluchnik, the Catholic Conference has received contact from other religious denominations that are equally concerned about those with a carrying-a-concealed-weapon (CCW) permit bringing guns into churches.

“Under current law, church officials are already allowed to authorize persons to carry a weapon (in church),” Maluchnik said. “Law enforcement officials are also already allowed to carry in a church. There is concern on our end, as well as from pastors with whom we’ve spoken, that the proposed CCW expansion would infringe upon the peaceful and prayerful environment of the worship community.”

An EPIC/MRA poll of 600 likely voters in early April found that 72 percent opposed the bill, 63 percent strongly so. Twenty-five percent favored the measure. Even in households where at least one member had a CCW permit, respondents opposed the effort to end the prohibition of pistols in certain areas.

Sen. Green immediately dismissed the survey results because the poll was commissioned by The Campaign to Keep Guns off Campus, founded in 2008 and based in New York. Through a spokesman, Green said: “This particular survey was bought and paid for by a radical gun-control group and so its results are suspicious.”

Former Macomb County prosecutor Carl Marlinga, who in 1996 ignited the push toward CCW reform in Michigan when he ushered in a “shall issue” policy for Macomb County, is cool to the idea of ending geographic restrictions.

In too many crowded situations, Marlinga said, a fistfight could escalate into a gun fight, and police statistics show that most bullets fired during the commission of a crime miss their target. In addition, Marlinga, now a private attorney, said a criminal does not look at a map, plan an attack, and choose a restricted zone as a preferred spot for mayhem.

“The pistol-free zones were created for those places that traditionally are ‘family friendly,’ with lots of children or students,” he said. “The Legislature struck a good balance on this.”

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