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Motel crime is focus of new Jefferson Parish regulatory initiative

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In 2010, when the **Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office** began cracking down on crime at motels, officials found there was no simple process to put a lodging spot out of business - even after owners were shown to be complicit in criminal activity. Rather, investigators had more success shutting down places that evaded taxes. The **La Village Motel in Metairie**, for example, was seized and demolished in 2011 not because the owner was knowingly renting rooms to prostitutes and pimps but because the business failed to report \$1.4 million in income.

"That was a turning point," said Sheriff **Newell Normand**, who now is backing a proposal to revoke licenses of businesses that are responsible for crime on the premises. "There are some that are complicit that may be paying their taxes," Normand said. "This just provides an additional avenue."

Parish Council member Cynthia Lee Sheng is sponsoring the proposal, which could come before the council in December. It would require that motels in unincorporated areas apply for a new license, separate from the occupational license that already lets them run their business. "They needed more than a tax vehicle to go after these bad operators," Lee-Sheng said of the Sheriff's Office. "They just felt the manager was turning a blind eye to it. They're just letting it happen."

The new license would be renewable annually by the Department of Inspection and Code Enforcement and the Sheriff's Office. It would require motels to show that the owner is not under probation for criminal offenses in the past 10 years and that its operators have not been found guilty in the past five years of certain criminal offenses such as "keeping a disorderly place" or possessing drugs. The Sheriff's Office would conduct a "complete criminal background investigation," according to an early draft of the ordinance.

A new committee would review complaints about licensed motels and hold a public hearing. It could recommend that the Parish Council revoke the license if the motel violated the law or to had a high number of arrests or calls to the Sheriff's Office.

"This is really not about shutting hotels down," Normand said. "This is about having them in compliance with applicable laws."

Lee-Sheng said the committee would function similarly to the **alcoholic beverage review committee** already in



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Newell Normand

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place parish-wide. That panel has recommended the revocation of barroom licenses for such violations as underage drinking or the selling of drugs on the premises.

"Just like in the bar business, there are some good operators and some bad operators," Lee-Sheng said. "This will only affect hotels with bad behavior, illegal behavior."

Would a manager found guilty five years ago of marijuana possession be fired, so a motel could be awarded a new license? Adrienne Wheeler, director and co-founder of the Justice and Accountability Center of Louisiana, worries that the draft ordinance infringes on the rights of people who have served time. She said criminal records were never intended to reflect an individual's character, only to be used for law enforcement. Such legislation as is now circulating in Jefferson would make it more difficult for those who have served time to return to free society as productive citizens, she said.

"It's really concerning," Wheeler said. "It's going well beyond the use or original purpose of the records."

"When you take it in isolation, it seems fairly innocuous. But when you look at all the regulations against people who have a criminal record, it paints a picture of people who are unable to enter society at all."

Lee-Sheng said she is still tailoring the proposal. She expects further meetings with the Greater New Orleans Hotel & Lodging Association and the Sheriff's Office.

The association's director, Mavis Early, said she would not comment until the legislation reaches its final form and reflects concerns from those she represents about difficulties that motel owners might have in applying for licenses. "Hopefully, it will be something we're satisfied with," she said.

Normand said that the Sheriff's Office is open to discussion about any aspect of the legislation, as long as it defines a process letting officials revoke licenses for owners shown to be complicit in criminal activity. "We're willing to compromise on pretty much most everything, just as long as we've got this avenue where we have a forum to present evidence and have license suspended," Normand said. "We do want to have enough meat in it so we can legitimately prove that we have a recalcitrant and criminal owner."

"I don't think anyone disagrees with what the idea and the ultimate goal is," Normand said, "The devil is in the details."



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Cynthia Lee-Sheng

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