

Much more room, much less smoke changes O'Rourke's atmosphere

By Cristine Romano
Staff Reporter

Doug McLeese keeps an overflowing datebook these days. -- The co-owner of O'Rourke's concedes that some days, he just doesn't get to all the tasks he's entered, and they must wait until tomorrow. Or maybe after the weekend.

The busy McLeese said the new O'Rourke's at 1329 O St. has been "generally well received." Quite an understatement to anyone who's ventured in or near the packed tavern on a weekend night.

"We'd hoped for an increase in sales after we moved," he said. "Luckily, we've been able to have that and still have the same type of clientele."

The new location has one and a half to two times the seating capacity of the old location. And there's "a lot more standing space, too" he said. And while the new O'Rourke's sports the old tables, chairs and popcorn bowls, changes are apparent to long-time patrons.

"We didn't set out to make a change in the atmosphere," McLeese said, "but we didn't set out to duplicate the old place, either."

Gone are the days of the dark, smoke-filled backroom atmosphere that some regulars miss and some new patrons disliked.

"We're getting people who would have never stopped in the old place," he said. "The old place was too crowded and smoky for some."

But ceiling height and amount of light aren't really what O'Rourke's is all about, McLeese said. People, both patrons and staff, are the key to the atmosphere.

"You can do anything you want to the physical make-up," he said. "And the atmosphere is still mainly the clientele and the people who staff the bar."

O'Rourke's has always drawn a diverse crowd, he said, and the new place is no different. While McLeese has fielded a few complaints of the new place drawing a whole new breed, he says the demographic breakdown of patrons is the same as before, "but there's just more of everybody."

"We're extremely happy with the clientele we've had in the past and have now," he said. "We didn't set out to get a new crowd."

McLeese said the O'Rourke's philosophy remains the same -- a good drink at a fair price in a place where everyone feels comfortable.

The transition from the tavern's old location, 121 N. 14th St, to the new place has gone "much smoother than any of us expected," McLeese said. Everyone has been coopera-

tive, from the staff to the city officials to the customers, he said. He had known that O'Rourke's would have to move from its old location, 121 N. 14th St., from the time he and co-owner Dave Moreland opened the tavern in 1980.

"It was obvious that the land there would be more profitable for some other use," he said.

So the move was just a matter of when. As the development project took shape and the land was designated for a parking lot, McLeese and Moreland searched for a new place to move. They decided to stay in the area of 14th and O streets because, McLeese said, "we enjoyed being around other well-run bars and businesses."

The new location has improvements from the employee point of view. More refrigeration space and a basement cooler allow more liquor to be kept on hand. And because the owners were able to lay out the interior, the behind-the-bar space was designed so bartenders could make drinks more efficiently, McLeese said.

While the old place was "home," McLeese said the new place is growing on him. And judging from the average crowd size, the new place has grown on a few other people, too.



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