

Dry Indigenous community 'months' from opening tavern to combat home-brew

ABC North West Qld / By Kelly Butterworth

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The Mornington Island Tavern is expected to begin serving alcohol in the coming months. *(Supplied: David Barnes)*

A remote Indigenous island that has been dry for two decades could soon see alcohol served at a local tavern, after more than a decade of consultation.

Mornington Island Shire Councillor David Barnes said he believed the council was "months" away from having a community tavern re-opened to serve legally-produced alcohol at specific times in restricted quantities.

He said the alcohol prohibition had had its place, but that dangerous amounts of poorly home-brewed alcohol were being consumed on the island, located in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

"Recently we undertook some community consultation here ... where we asked people how they felt about the prohibition," Cr Barnes said.

"A large percentage of people were in favour of re-introducing some form of controlled alcohol as opposed to continuing down the path of prohibition.

"Prohibition, unfortunately, all of the intentions are good, as a philosophy it sounds workable, but as we've seen in history and as we've seen here on Mornington Island ... unfortunately it

Key points:

- Mornington Island in Queensland's Gulf has been a dry community since the early 2000s
- The local Indigenous shire council hopes to open a tavern in the town in the coming months
- It's hoped the tavern will help reduce the amount of dangerous home-brew alcohol on the island

doesn't do what it's meant to do.

"Prohibition on Mornington Island has become part of the problem instead of the solution."

Home-brew health concerns

Cr Barnes said the prevalence of home-brew was concerning, with no consistency in the products.

He said despite the overwhelming support for the tavern, some members of the community were wary.

"Some people fear a return to previous conditions, but home-brew is fairly closely mirroring those problems in any case," he said.

"I mean, prohibition wasn't just put it on the ground here as an exercise or an experiment — it was an attempt to try to curb some of the already dangerous situations that were evolving because of alcohol on Mornington Island.

"And people are afraid that that might happen again."

Cr Barnes said he hoped to see a tavern legally operating in the coming months.

"Hopefully within the next few months we will start operating again, with a licence that was fairly similar to [a lodge] that was here on the island at one time," he said.

"We'll have a motel and a restaurant where people will be able to consume alcohol while they are customers there. There won't be any takeaways in the short term, though this is being worked toward also."

Dry community needs support

Peter d'Abbs, an honorary fellow at the Menzies School of Health Research in Brisbane, said issues faced by dry communities, such as home-brew and 'sly grogging' (the illegal sale of alcohol), were difficult to combat.

His research has shown that dry communities can be effective, but only when the community supports the initiative.



Mornington Island Councillor David Barnes says prohibition does not do what it is meant to do. (Supplied: David Barnes)



Morningson Island, in the Gulf of Carpentaria has been dry for decades. (ABC News: Lucy Murray)

"Certainly in the Northern Territory, on balance, I don't think there's any doubt that the dry communities there have had ... a net beneficial effect, and that certainly doesn't mean they're perfect," Dr d'Abbs said.

"But one of the key aspects of the dry communities legislation in the Northern Territory is that communities become dry because they want to become dry.

"Now, it's a bit complicated, because the Commonwealth intervention in 2007 overrules that, but prior to that, all the dry communities were dry communities by choice."

Dr d'Abbs said the effectiveness of re-introducing alcohol to a previously dry community often came down to leadership and being able to find common ground.

"It's difficult anywhere; it's particularly difficult in most Aboriginal communities," he said.

"A lot of this comes back to the extent of community willingness to try to manage alcohol and that means the heavy drinkers have to be willing to compromise."