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## BEACH BOOZE BAN ENDURES SANDS OF TIME

**CRIME, PROBLEMS HAVE BEEN REDUCED SINCE SAN DIEGO CITY BEACHES WENT ALCOHOL-FREE**

**WILLIS ALLEN & MONICA GREEN**

It wasn't so long ago that summer holidays brought nothing but headaches for lifeguards, police and people who lived near San Diego city beaches. That's all in the past, now that we're in our fourth summer with alcohol-free beaches.

Any sunny weekend still brings crowds to the beaches, which causes traffic and parking problems. If you live near the beach, you learn to live with them.

Not too long ago, however, some beach problems were out of control. Because San Diego had the last large urban beaches in Southern California that allowed alcohol, we experienced all kinds of problems. Our beach communities had more violent crimes and alcohol-related crimes than most other parts of the city. Ocean Beach, Pacific Beach, Mission Bay Park and Mission Beach accounted for more than half of the underage drinking violations in the city.

Tourists complained about rude behavior at the beaches.

Mountains of trash were left on the beaches after major holidays, and volunteers worked hard to clean it all up.

Lifeguards were concerned for their safety, and had plans in place to get their people out of the guard towers if the beach crowds turned violent.

Police had less time to deal with traffic and parking issues because officers kept moving from one hot spot to another, trying to defuse alcohol-related problems before people got hurt. Taking drunks to jail or detox ate up huge chunks of police budgets. In 2004, Police Chief William Lansdowne launched a three-year plan to deal with the beaches on the Fourth of July, with a million-dollar price tag for that single holiday period each year.

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The tipping point came on Labor Day 2007, when a beach brawl spun out of control in Pacific Beach. Lifeguards evacuated some of their towers because of concerns for their safety. Police in riot gear lined the boardwalk at the foot of Reed Avenue. More than a dozen people were arrested, and the incident was seen on television newscasts across the country.



**A temporary beach alcohol ban that went into effect in San Diego in January 2008 worked so well that city voters made it permanent in November 2008.**

U-T FILE PHOTO

A temporary beach alcohol ban went into effect in January 2008. The trial ban worked so well that voters made it permanent in November 2008.

We've had alcohol-free beaches for three summers. What has changed in the beach areas? Alcohol-related crime is down. Violent crime is down.

Vandalism of homes and yards has decreased.

The number of underage drinking violations is less than one-third of the city's total. Police have reduced the number of officers on holidays, preserving a big slice of the department's overtime budget.

This isn't just about statistics. The atmosphere is better at San Diego city beaches and that benefits everyone, not just people who live here.

Tourists and county residents can come to the beach without being harassed by unruly drunks.

Volunteers who come to the beach to clean up after major holidays find the beaches in near-pristine condition. According to the Union-Tribune story on July 6, 2008, "It was a sight that stunned early-morning surfers and left environmentalists in disbelief. For the first time in memory, San Diego-area beaches didn't look like a dump the morning after Independence Day." Instead of hauling away beer cartons, ice chests, furniture and trash, volunteers now focus on getting cigarette butts and other small items out of the sand. That means less trash washing into the bays and ocean, which protects birds, fish and marine mammals.

Cleanup volunteers have more time to pick up trash in neighborhoods near the beach.

San Diego taxpayers get more bang for their buck, even if they never go to the beach. As budgets are being slashed, our first responders become more precious than ever. Every police car, ambulance or firetruck that isn't at the beach means there's one more available to serve other parts of the city.

Finally, the beach is no longer a place where teenagers can easily get their hands on alcohol. This means fewer young people will have alcohol-related problems in the future, not just in the beach communities, but everywhere in San Diego County.

The Fourth of July is on the horizon. It's a three day weekend this year.

A few years ago, many beach residents would simply leave town to avoid the noise, trash and unruly crowds. Now they can stay home for the weekend.

Will it be crowded and noisy? Will there be traffic and parking problems? Of course, but San Diego city beaches will be cleaner, safer and more fun for everyone, whether they live here or are just visiting. For that, we thank the voters of San Diego who made alcohol free beaches a reality.

***Allen's** family has owned the Crystal Pier Hotel and Cottages for 50 years. **Green** has lived in Pacific Beach since 1977.*