

The building, which houses Duke's and the adjacent Varsity, was recently sold. According to staff, the proposed new lease terms would have made operating the bar financially unsustainable, pushing it into the red. For many patrons, the closure represents a sudden and poignant farewell to a neighborhood grappling with how to address persistent late-night violence.

While the owner declined to be interviewed on camera, they informed WISN 12 News that a confluence of factors contributed to the decision. These include evolving drinking habits, shifting demographics, and several violent incidents that have plagued Water Street. The recent building sale and the significant rent increase proposed by the new owners were ultimately insurmountable financial hurdles. Bartenders and customers alike have described Duke's as a vital "home base" for the busy entertainment strip, a sentiment echoed by local news outlets that have chronicled the bar's history.

The closure of Duke's on Water occurs as city officials are actively debating strategies to maintain the vibrancy of Water Street while mitigating chaos. Proposals at City Hall have ranged from weapon checkpoints to stricter regulations for food trucks. Notably, a proposed 10 p.m. curfew for downtown food trucks and other restrictions, as reported by CBS 58, faced significant pushback from vendors, leading to ongoing negotiations. Meanwhile, some bars have independently implemented their own safety measures, including wand searches at entrances and tighter capacity controls, as highlighted by TMJ4.

The issue of safety on Water Street gained particular prominence following a deadly shooting in the spring, which prompted the Milwaukee Common Council to intensify discussions on increased policing and security perimeters around entertainment districts. WISN 12 News reported that several security-focused ideas, such as a defined security zone and weapon checkpoints, were sent back to committee due to legal questions and public opposition. Business owners have expressed a preference for more visible, on-foot police presence rather than prolonged policy debates within City Hall.

Longtime patrons recall Duke's as a go-to spot for students and downtown workers seeking a final, affordable drink and a lively atmosphere. With the bar now dark, the future of the corner of Water and Juneau remains uncertain, and neighbors anticipate a lingering quiet in the absence of the familiar establishment.

The shutdown serves as a stark reminder for employees and regulars of how rising rents and public safety challenges can impact established neighborhood businesses. As city leaders continue to deliberate on solutions for downtown's late-night issues, the empty stools at Duke's stand as a silent testament to the vulnerability of nightlife establishments and their workforce to both market pressures and street-level violence.