

An Update on Boston's Liquor License Upgrade Process

By Adam Barnosky on January 13, 2026



More updates are rolling out on the City of Boston's Liquor License Upgrade process. Here is what you need to know:

On January 8, the Boston Licensing Board voted to adopt new regulations (Board Rule 1.08R) to authorize conversion of Beer/Wine Licenses to All Alcohol Licenses for existing license holders, with certain restrictions. Key takeaways from the Board's vote:

- **Upgrade Application Process is Now Open:** Applications remain subject to the statutory notice, publication, certified mailing, and local hearing requirements. Applications are processed as a "Change of License Category" and will need to be subsequently approved by the ABCC before the upgraded license is issued.
- **Community Process:** The Board will not require a new community process where the licensee has completed a community process related to an all-alcohol license application within the prior two years.
- **Non-Transferability of Upgraded Licenses:** Any all-alcohol license issued under Rule 1.08(R) is non-transferable and cannot be sold, assigned, or transferred to another party (unless/until it is downgraded back to a beer/wine license, see below).
- **Reversion if No Longer in Use:** If an upgraded license is cancelled, revoked, or no longer in use, it must be physically returned to the Licensing Board and automatically reverts to a wine and malt beverages license. The reverted license returns either to the general quota or to the applicable special legislation quota, depending on the original issuance.
- **Downgrades Permitted:** Licensees may voluntarily downgrade back to a wine and malt beverages license through the application process. If the original license was from the "general quota," the downgraded license will again be transferable upon issuance.
- **"Public Need" Standard:** The Board will apply the standard public need analysis for upgrade application. This standard will be presumed where the licensee has held a wine and malt beverages license for at least one year prior to applying for an upgrade.
- **Change of Location.** Upgraded licenses may seek to change location, subject to a public need analysis at the proposed new location and consideration of the impact on the prior location.

The adoption of Rule 1.08(R) follows the Board's October 2025 informational hearing and public comment period and provides the regulatory framework necessary to implement the City Council-approved license conversion program. Boston was among the first to act after the State Legislature enacted G.L. c. 138, § 12D in June 2025, which authorized the upgrade program with municipal adoption. With the regulations now in effect, eligible beer and wine licensees in Boston have a defined and immediate pathway to expand to full liquor service, while preserving the City's longstanding regulatory approach to transferability, quota management, and public need.

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***Adam Barnosky** chairs RIW's **Restaurant & Hospitality Practice Group** and handles alcoholic beverage licensing, commercial real estate and corporate transactions for the retail, restaurant, and hospitality industries; including the representation of restaurant groups, hotels, sports and entertainment companies, food halls, retailers, hospitality lenders, and award winning chefs and operators. Adam can be reached at arb@riw.com.*

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