

# Thousand Oaks Acorn

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## Behind closed doors

### Growing number of massage businesses rubs some the wrong way

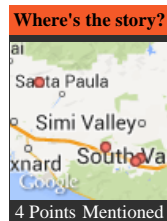
By Darleen Principe  
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**OPEN LATE**—A pedestrian on [Thousand Oaks Boulevard](#) walks past a business offering massages. It's one of 47 such establishments in the city, up from 16 just five years ago. Representatives from City Hall and TOPD say a 2009 state law has contributed to the proliferation.

RICHARD GILLARD/Acorn Newspapers

The number of establishments offering massage services in Thousand Oaks has nearly tripled in the past five years, and local authorities say it's becoming increasingly difficult to ensure the businesses are operating legally.



In 2008, there were 16 licensed massage parlors in the city. They now number 47, the majority on or near [Thousand Oaks Boulevard](#). And some local officials are concerned that a few may be fronts for prostitution.

Capt. Jim Fryhoff of the Thousand Oaks Police Department said that because of the rapid proliferation of massage establishments, it's becoming "a challenge to diligently monitor each of them."

"If it continues on this path and we keep adding more at this rate, it becomes more possible for illicit activity to occur because we have less of an ability to

monitor the ones we already have," the assistant T.O. police chief said. "We have a finite amount of resources and we can't always be everywhere all the time."

The recent boom in massage businesses was aided in part by 2009's Senate Bill 731, which established a voluntary certification process for massage technicians throughout the state. Although the law was meant to put consumers' minds at ease by encouraging massage professionals to undergo proper training and obtain state certification, SB 731 prevents municipalities from using traditional permitting and zoning restrictions to regulate the industry.

The law established the nonprofit California Massage Therapy Council, which issues permits to trained massage therapists and allows them to work anywhere in the state without further checks and balances.

Before SB 731, it was more difficult for massage businesses to get permits to operate in the city, said Melissa Hurtado, revenue operations manager for T.O.

"We'd do background checks and apply city zoning requirements," she said. "But now all they have to do is get state certifications. They don't even pay for registration with the city—just the standard business tax."

In 2009, the year SB 731 took effect, the number of massage establishments in the city jumped from 16 to 24. The number has been climbing steadily since then.

Two years ago, in an effort to double-check compliance, the City Council passed an ordinance requiring all massage establishments to register with the city and provide copies of CAMTC certifications for all the massage technicians they employ.

According to the CAMTC website, there are 223 certified massage technicians in Thousand Oaks, [Newbury Park](#) and

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### **Law set to expire**

SB 731 is scheduled to expire in January 2015, and the Ventura Council of Governments—an advisory committee consisting of elected representatives from all 10 cities in the county—voted to declare their support of the expiration.

Fryhoff said letting the bill sunset may allow local governments to limit the number of new massage establishments entering the city.

“If it expires, we can decide how we want to establish local control,” he said. “For example, we may be able to limit how many are allowed to be in a certain area, kind of like what we do with liquor licenses. Right now the city doesn’t have that authority.”

### **Enforcement issues**

Besides supporting the expiration of SB 731, VCOG also voted to send a letter to [Ventura County](#) District Attorney Greg Totten asking him to make the prosecution of cases of illicit sex acts at massage parlors a higher priority.

Totten told the *Thousand Oaks Acorn* that his office already takes prostitution cases very seriously.

Over the past two years, the D.A.’s office has filed nearly 70 percent of the 110 prostitution-related cases that have been presented by law enforcement—a number Totten considers to be a “high filing ratio.”

“Part of the challenge is that prostitution cases are inherently difficult for law enforcement to investigate, so they don’t present us with very many,” the D.A. said. “Prostitution typically doesn’t occur in the light of day. It occurs behind closed doors and in concealed locations. They tend to be very difficult to deal with. But we do review every single case presented to us.”

Councilmember Al Adam, who represents Thousand Oaks on VCOG, said the group’s goal is to “weed out the bad (massage parlors) to protect the good ones.”

“The City of Thousand Oaks wants to protect the legitimate massage therapists that offer a valuable service to the community by weeding out the potential problem therapists . . . if there even are any.”

Adam is in favor of letting SB 731 expire.

“The law took local control away from the cities and that law should sunset so the cities can regulate the number of these establishments,” said Adam, who pointed out that very few infractions have been observed in T.O., and those that did had to do with improper licensing, not sex.

Fryhoff said owners of illicit massage business are “attuned” to the requirements for determining whether prostitution has taken place.

“They know we need to prove that there was an exchange of money for sex,” the assistant police chief said. “They know how to skirt those things, maybe through implied tips or some other mechanism. Proving that money was exchanged for a sex act, as opposed to a massage, is very difficult.”

### **A bigger issue?**

Despite the district attorney’s high filing ratio for prostitution cases, Totten said, he, like city officials, is concerned with the proliferation of massage parlors, particularly because some could have links to human trafficking.

“We have not been able to definitely establish clear links between human trafficking and massage facilities in [Ventura County](#),” he said. “But I think many of us in law enforcement are highly suspicious that human trafficking is occurring in this county. And we’re working to develop the skills to uncover that.”

Studies show that organized crime rings and gangs have used massage businesses as a way to exploit victims of human trafficking, Totten said. In some cases, women are brought into the country and forced to work in massage

parlors offering sex services.

“There’s a real concern that it’s a big money-making operation,” he said. “And if you’re just going after prostitutes and ‘johns’ (customers of prostitutes), you’re only tilting on the edge of the problem.”

While detecting prostitution at massage parlors remains a challenge for law enforcement, Fryhoff said, one thing authorities can do is perform random compliance checks to ensure those offering services have the proper credentials.

During a compliance sweep in February 2012, police arrested one masseuse on suspicion of performing a lewd act. A massage business on N. Moorpark Road was shut down because the owner didn’t have the required permits.

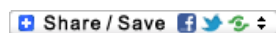
Ken Chu, owner of U-Relax at 3699 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., said he welcomes the compliance checks. He said officers come in to his business randomly about five times per year.

“All my massage therapists are professionals,” said Chu, who’s been in business in T.O. since 2008. “Our customers come in only for massage and nothing else.”

The business owner, who employs seven CAMTC-certified massage technicians, said he’s “a little bit worried” that reputable massage parlors are getting a bad rap because of the few that might be linked to prostitution.

“But the people can say anything they want,” he said. “I have a lot of customers who always come back. They know my place is for massage and for foot spa, nothing else. I have a good record.”

[Return to top](#)



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