

Coalition Blasts Plan To Boost State Funds With Wine in Grocery Stores

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Coalition, Legislators and Liquor Stores Fight Governor's 'Outrageous' Proposal

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BAY RIDGE — It's most certainly not a matter of "I'll drink to that" when it comes to Governor David Paterson's controversial proposal to permit the sale of wine in grocery stores, bodegas, delis, mini-marts and gas stations statewide: a total of 19,000 potential new wine sales outlets.

Opponents who formed the Last Store on Main Street Coalition want to dunk the plan. Members of the coalition see it as a way to kill small businesses and jobs, and increase the number of underage drinkers with no fiscal benefit to a broken state government economy.

"The governor was apparently influenced by the big buck stores," said Heather Hamilton, owner of Long's Discount Wines and Liquors in Bay Ridge, speaking at the recent Community Board 10 meeting at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Dyker Heights.

"They don't care about mom-and-pop small businesses and the impact on them," she told the board, noting that nearly 40 percent of liquor stores statewide could close, according to a liquor store association study.

Hamilton cited Florida, which allows legal wine sales in grocery stores, as an example of the potential dangers that could happen here. She said, "It has three times the number of underage drunk drivers reported as compared to New York State. Our governor has been told that sales will increase tax revenue. But there has been no such increase in Florida."

For the past 28 years, opponents noted, no state has approved the proposal. Colorado, Kentucky, Massachusetts and Tennessee rejected similar proposals over the past two years.

"In the worst economy since the Great Depression, Governor Paterson is proposing a job killing plan that would crush small businesses across New York. It's outrageous and wrong," said coalition leader and founder Jeff Sanders, the Retailers Alliance president.

State Needs Wine Sales Tax Money, Governor Contends

The cash-strapped state government struggling with a large deficit believes that it could rake in \$3.2 million in taxes from wine sales in grocery shops, Hamilton noted. But it could force the closing of liquor stores statewide, such as her long-established store at 7917 Fifth Avenue, originally owned by Mike and Tom Long. They turned ownership over to Hamilton two years ago, after opening the business in 1983.

The plan was first proposed a year ago and was dropped after widespread opposition. This time around it is called "a dangerous scheme, reckless idea, job killer and fiscal gimmick" by Democrat Assemblyman Steve Cymbrowitz of Sheepshead Bay. Republican State Senator Marty Golden of Bay Ridge has also blasted the proposal.

"I guess the governor didn't pay attention last year when liquor stores across the state from Brooklyn to Buffalo signed petitions, rallied and opposed this measure that would hurt business and would force many mom-and-pop liquor stores to close," said Senator Golden, a former Bay Ridge Fifth Avenue business leader.

Cymbrowitz warned, "While the initial sale of new wine merchant licenses will realize millions of dollars for the state, it is a onetime revenue raiser that puts the state's residents at peril for decades to come." State Liquor Authority (SLA) staff was severely scaled-back due to cost-cutting measures in the cash-strapped state, with only 38 inspectors statewide overseeing 70,000 license holders, said Cymbrowitz. "The state is courting with disaster. This is not the answer to the state's fiscal problems." Among coalition members are the city and state Patrolmen's Benevolent Associations, the NYS Troopers and Sheriffs Associations, and many substance abuse experts.