

Colorado: House kills bill aiming to let convenience stores, groceries sell full-strength beer (Excerpt)

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By Tim Hoover

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Legislation to let convenience stores and groceries in Colorado sell full-strength beer was crushed Monday in the House, though it was the first time such a bill had ever made it to the floor.

The bill died on a standing division in the House, with only 18 members - 12 of them Republicans - rising in support of House Bill 1284, well under the 33 votes necessary for approval.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Larry Liston, R-Colorado Springs, tried to make the bill more palatable to lawmakers from both parties who said it would hurt family-owned liquor stores. Liston had amended the bill to allow liquor stores to sell nonperishable foods - such as chips and other snacks - and to allow small liquor stores to own multiple locations.

Under Colorado law that is nearly 80 years old, only liquor stores may sell full-strength beer, wine and spirits. Convenience stores and groceries are permitted only to sell "fermented malt beverage" - 3.2 beer.

When liquor stores won the right to open on Sundays several years ago, convenience stores and groceries complained that it cut into their game-day beer sales. They have been battling liquor stores ever since for the right to sell full-strength beer, and the fight has drawn in groceries, restaurants and bars, microbrewers and, this year, unions representing grocery-store workers.

The ongoing "beer wars" at the Capitol have begun to try even the patience of supporters of expanding the sale of full-strength beer, with many lawmakers saying they are tired of spending so much time on the issue.

Three bills in prior years to allow convenience stores and groceries to sell full-strength beer failed, dying at the committee level without ever being considered on the floor of the House or Senate.

"Right now, we have a bifurcated system," Liston said, arguing the bill would amend Colorado's "archaic" liquor laws and allow competition.

But his arguments and attempts to soften the bill didn't sway a majority of members, many of whom said the legislation would hurt mom-and-pop liquor stores and more than 100 Colorado craft brewers who sell beer directly to small liquor retailers.

"It will cripple the small businesses I have in my district," said Rep. Rhonda Fields, D-Aurora, who said some liquor store owners have taken out second mortgages on their homes to finance their businesses.

In an unusual political alliance, Rep. Crisanta Duran, D-Denver, signed on as Liston's co-sponsor. Duran is a strong pro-union Democrat and had argued the legislation would help create more jobs for unionized grocery workers.

Yet those opposed to the bill included a number of self-declared "free market" Republicans, such as Rep. Chris Holbert, R-Parker.

"I do not look at this as a question of establishing a more level playing field," Holbert said, rejecting Liston's arguments and calling the bill "using the power of government to pick new winners and losers."

Liston offered an amendment on the floor that would have put the issue before Colorado voters in 2012. He argued that would settle the matter once and for all.

That exasperated some members, including Rep. Lois Court, D-Denver, who asked, "What the heck have we been down here for debating this for how many hours?"

The amendment failed on a voice vote.