

Kansas wrestles with expanding alcohol sale sites

By JOHN HANNA - Feb 16, 2011

By The Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Kansas liquor store owners formed an unusual alliance Wednesday with public health and temperance advocates in urging state legislators to reject a proposal to allow grocery and convenience stores to sell wine and full-strength beer.

The Senate Federal and State Affairs Committee is considering a bill to allow more stores to sell wine and full-strength beer, starting Jan. 1, and to phase in liquor sales at grocery and convenience stores by 2015. Supporters contend it will modernize state law, help struggling rural grocery stores and create new jobs.

Many liquor store owners believe the change will allow large retail chains to drive them out of business. But several also joined temperance advocates in arguing during the committee's hearing Wednesday that increasing the number of stores selling such products will lead to additional social problems and drunken driving deaths.

State law allows grocery and convenience stores to sell "cereal malt beverage," or "weak" or "low-point" beer, making Kansas among five states to regulate brews differently based on their alcohol content. With Kansas' dry social heritage, the proliferation of sites for selling stronger stuff has often been a potent issue.

"It is strange to be in cahoots with the liquor store dealers," said Frances Wood, a Topeka resident and member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, adding that her concern is an increase in alcohol-related problems. "It's a safety issue, not a money issue."

The committee heard from supporters of the bill Tuesday and expects to debate it by early next week.

For years, such proposals have stood little chance of legislative approval, something often attributed to the state's history. Kansans added a prohibition amendment to their state constitution in 1880 and

didn't repeal it until 1948, or 15 years after other states ended national Prohibition. Kansans didn't approve the sale of liquor by the drink in public places such as restaurants until 1986.

But trade associations for Kansas grocery and convenience store owners have formed a new group, the Coalition for Jobs and Consumer Choice. It includes chains such as retailer Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Tulsa, Okla.-based QuikTrip Corp.

QuikTrip spokesman Mike Thornbrugh noted the chain recently tore down a store on the Kansas side of the Kansas City metropolitan area and built a new one on the Missouri side so it could sell full-strength beer, wine and liquor.

"I only moved the store 100 feet," he said. "It's crazy that you'd have to resort to that type of move to protect your business."

Under the bill, liquor stores would continue to hold special licenses allowing them to sell liquor, along with full-strength beer and wine.

The number of such licenses, now 766, couldn't increase statewide from July 1 through Dec. 31, 2014. A grocery or convenience store could obtain one during that period only if a liquor store closed or sold its license, but after Jan. 1, 2015, the state could go back to issuing an unlimited number of retail liquor licenses.

Opponents of the bill formed their own group, Keep Kansans in Business. When supporters touted a University of Kansas economist's study that changing state law could generate 15,000 new jobs, opponents of the bill quickly produced a report from another veteran economist calling the study flawed and not valid.

But liquor store owners also argue that if there are more sites selling alcoholic beverages, the state will have a tougher time monitoring them and preventing underage sales. They suggested that in some urban neighborhoods, the bill could lead to multiple liquor stores at busy intersections.

"Times are changing, but that doesn't seem like to us a change for good," said Dennison Woods, the owner of a Wichita liquor store.

Garry Winget, a lobbyist for Kansans for Addiction Prevention, said recovering alcoholics can avoid the temptation to buy alcohol by avoiding liquor stores altogether but if the bill passes, they'll be confronted with displays of beer when they go grocery shopping. He said based on the number of annual drunken driving deaths in Kansas, if legislators approve the bill, "You're probably killing 30 to 40 people."

"I assume that when the grocery stores and convenience stores used their figures on number of jobs created, you included those in health care and the funeral business," Winget said.

Supporters of the bill find such arguments overheated.

Thornbrugh noted that cereal malt beverage, or beer that is 3.2 percent or less alcohol by weight, isn't much weaker than "strong" beer, which can be 3.6 percent alcohol by weight. He said treating them differently under state law is "silly" when the drinking age for both is 21.

"We sell adult beverages now," he said.