

Oklahoma Gazette

The price of modernizing alcohol laws

Commentary



Brett Robinson

July 18th, 2012

Thanks to a recent state Supreme Court decision, Oklahoma voters will decide whether to allow the 15 most populous counties to vote on allowing the sale of wine in certain grocery stores. They will vote whether to "modernize" so-called "antiquated" liquor laws so that our daily lives will be more convenient. Some claim this will be an excellent job recruitment tool, up there with high wages and on-site Botox injections.

This will mark the third major statewide vote on liquor law reform since the national repeal of Prohibition in 1933. In the first major statewide vote, Oklahoma swiftly (26 years) followed up on that 21st amendment to the U.S. Constitution by repealing prohibition here in 1959. Twenty-five years later Oklahomans allowed the sale of liquor by the drink in bars and restaurants.

So what kind of change do we really want or need, and at what cost? Let's start with the facts.

First, Oklahoma has a robust alcohol market. We have more than 650 liquor stores, and there are approximately 2,000 spirits and 2,000 strong beers registered with the state Alcoholic Beverage Laws Enforcement Commission. More than 15,000 wines are available in the marketplace. And more than 4,000 grocery and convenience stores can sell 3.2 beer, with several craft and import brands available in a low-point version.

Despite such options, if I've heard it once, I've heard it a million times: "We need to modernize the liquor laws so I can get Jughead wine from San Juan Capistrano," or, "We need less antiquated liquor laws so I can get Bullsnout Beer from East Timor."

The reality is they may not make enough Bullsnout Beer to ship to the burgeoning Oklahoma market. And Jughead may purposefully want to focus on a narrow regional market.

Second, selling more types of alcohol in more outlets comes at a price. Any parent of an Oklahoma teenager knows how easy it is for underage drinkers to get their hands on 3.2 beer.

They also know how hard it is for them to get their hands on spirits, wine or strong beer, unless an adult is buying or giving it to them. This is because local law enforcement is responsible for enforcing laws regarding the sale of 3.2 beer and they simply don't have the resources to adequately monitor underage access to it. One of ABLE's primary missions is to police liquor stores, and its expertise at underage enforcement — combined with the fact that a liquor store owner will lose his or her livelihood if caught selling to minors — adds up to less underage access at liquor stores.

So maybe this new state question strikes a fair balance between cost, convenience and product availability. Regardless, if we're going to sell more types of alcohol in more outlets, we will need more resources for ABLE and local law enforcement to enforce underage access laws.

Also, outlets selling the wine will need more skin in the game, as far as compliance is concerned. That is the cost of modern convenience.

Robinson is an attorney, lobbyist and president of Beer Distributors of Oklahoma.