

Law Enforcement Group Against Wine Bill

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A law enforcement group on Wednesday voiced opposition to a legislative proposal to allow wine to be sold in Tennessee grocery and convenience stores, with one police chief citing a recent high-profile alcohol abuse case at the University of Tennessee as a cautionary tale.

More than 100 sheriffs and police chiefs have signed a petition by the coalition Tennessee Law Enforcement for Strong Alcohol Laws, calling on lawmakers to keep the current rules governing wine sales in place.

Allowing stronger alcohol to be sold in grocery and convenience stores would make enforcing underage drinking laws more difficult and would come at a price for public safety, said Madison County Sheriff David Woolfork.

"The more you have, the more the problem," he said. "Rather than spending a lot of time investigating hard drugs on the street, they're having to police convenience stores."

Supporters of the measure to dismantle laws that allow wine to be sold only alongside liquor in designated package stores argue that the current system is inconvenient to shoppers and prevents competition.

Knoxville police Chief David Rausch said a recent incident that led to a fraternity's ban at the University of Tennessee should dispel supporters' claims that underage drinkers aren't interested in obtaining wine.

In the case, a 20-year-old student was hospitalized after a drinking game said to involve boxed wine and the consumption of alcohol through enemas. The student later acknowledge participating in a drinking game but denied receiving the enema.

"Regardless of what actually took place, and regardless of how the alcohol was ingested, it was wine," Rausch said. "And it was all part of a game."

Republican Rep. Jon Lundberg of Bristol, a main sponsor of the wine-in-supermarkets proposal, called the concerns raised by the law enforcement group "ludicrous."

"This is not an alcohol bill, it's a business bill," he said, adding that he supports "incredibly strong restrictions on alcohol abuse," such as bringing Tennessee into compliance with federal guidelines on open containers in vehicles.

Under Tennessee law, anybody buying beer from grocery stores or convenience stores must present a photo ID. Liquor stores don't have the same requirement.

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But Woolfork said clerks at convenience stores aren't as vigorous about checking IDs and sometimes have underage friends they allow to buy beer.

Participants in the news conference at the legislative office complex acknowledged that their view is not the official position of either the Tennessee Association of Chiefs of Police or the Tennessee Sheriff's Association.

The news conference was organized by Seigenthaler Public Relations, which is representing the Tennessee Wine and Spirits Retailers Association this year.

Woolfork said his interest in the issue is not driven by the economic concerns of liquor store owners, who stand to lose considerable business to large supermarket chains if the law is changed.

"Yes, we've gotten phone calls from liquor stores," Woolfork said. "But our main focus was we knew about the problem we had in (convenience) stores in terms of sales of beer to underage kids."

Jarron Springer, president of the Tennessee Grocers and Convenience Store Association, criticized the news conference in a statement.

"It is disappointing that the liquor retailers would hide behind law enforcement officials in an effort to keep Tennessee consumers from having a voice in the wine in retail food stores debate," he said.

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