

Tenn. House Passes Supermarket Wine Bill

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — A years-long effort to allow [wine to be sold outside of Tennessee liquor stores](#) [1] easily cleared what was expected to be its toughest hurdle on Thursday when the state House overwhelmingly approved the measure.

The bill would grant authority to cities and counties that currently have package stores or liquor-by-the-drink sales to hold referendums on whether to allow wine to be sold in supermarkets and convenience stores.

Debate lasted one hour and 15 minutes, with opponents raising the specter of Nancy Pelosi, crony capitalism and the undue influence of the liquor lobby to try to dissuade colleagues from voting for the bill. But in the end, those pleas were largely ignored and the measure passed on a 71-15 vote.

"Members have heard from their constituents, and the constituents overwhelmingly wanted the opportunity to buy wine in grocery stores," House Speaker Beth Harwell, R-Nashville and a key proponent of the bill, said after the vote. "But members really wanted to protect local businesses as well."

The measure would allow for local votes to take place as early as this fall, but would not allow supermarket wine sales until at least July 2016. Supermarkets located within 500 feet of an existing liquor store could have to wait an additional year.

The bill's main House sponsor, Republican Rep. Jon Lundberg of Bristol, said that delay is necessary to give liquor stores a chance to prepare for the change.

The Senate, which passed its version 23-8 last month, is expected to go along with minor changes in the House bill and send the measure for the governor's signature.

Republican Gov. Bill Haslam was not a supporter of allowing wine sales in supermarkets or convenience stores when he was running for office in 2010. But Haslam has said he will defer to the Legislature on the issue.

Before the final vote took place on the House bill, the chamber rejected several proposed changes that included efforts to allow high-alcohol beer, move the effective date up to next year and eliminate a mandatory 20 percent markup on wine sales.

Lundberg says those proposals would have derailed a carefully crafted compromise on the bill in which "nobody's overly happy, because nobody's come out as the sole winner."

Under current law, supermarkets and convenience stores can sell beer containing up to 6.5 percent alcohol by volume. Anything stronger can only be sold in package

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stores, which can't sell anything beyond booze and lottery tickets.

While the concept of supermarket wine sales has broad public support according to various polls, the measure had failed in several consecutive legislative sessions amid [opposition from liquor wholesalers and package store owners](#) [2].

Melissa Eads, a spokeswoman for the Nashville division of the Kroger supermarket chain called it a "huge day," even though supporters of wide wine sales aren't necessarily happy with every aspect of the bill.

"We knew it was going to be about compromise, and we're fine with where we are," she said. "We're just glad that we're going to be able to hopefully have a successful referendum passing in all the municipalities, and eventually be able to sell wine in our grocery stores."

Harwell and Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey, R-Blountville, have been major supporters of the supermarket wine measure and have played key roles in forcing liquor wholesalers and package store owners to the negotiating table.

Ramsey said he expects the Senate to agree to the House changes on March 3.

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Associated Press writer Lucas L. Johnson II contributed to this report.

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