

'Zion Curtain' Debate Still Smolders in Utah

ANNIE KNOX, Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — One of Utah's most notable liquor laws is again sparking friction in the state Legislature.

A renewed effort to [take down restaurant walls that shield diners' eyes from the shaking and stirring of drinks](#) [1] comes from one of the state's Republican lawmakers.

"It's unkind, it's ineffective and it's costly," bill sponsor Rep. Kraig Powell, R-Heber City, told a committee Tuesday.

The measure squeaked out of the committee meeting Tuesday by an 8-7 vote after testimony from about a dozen voices, some intensifying to a near yell and others continuing to speak after lawmakers silenced their microphones. It now goes to the full House for consideration.

The measure surfaces as Mormon church leaders this year ask legislators to leave alone the state's liquor code. And other lawmakers have said in recent weeks that standing laws are sufficient.

Rep. Doug Sagers, R-Tooele, agreed. "To me this seems like a solution looking for a problem," he said.

A similar bill died late last year after critics said the rule likely limits drunken driving and underage drinking.

Those in favor of Powell's proposal say the state invites visitors to its ski slopes and vast canyons, only to make them feel alien by skirting out of sight to pour their drinks.

And current law mandates that only some restaurants need to put up the so-called Zion curtains, so some say the patchwork rule is unfair.

But others contend that the 2010 rule, which went up in a compromise between lawmakers, does important work by keeping restaurants from feeling like bars, and preventing children and teens from eyeing alcoholic drinks.

The current rule warns children that liquor deserves different treatment than soda and juices, said Laura Bunker of United Families International.

"It shields them from the glamour of bartending," she said.

Gordon Lindsay, a professor of public health at Brigham Young University, said tearing down the walls could convince young adults that drinking is the norm.

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"Anybody who says that the way we sell our products is not part of the equation is an idiot, or they're working for the industry," he said.

As legislators reconvened at the Capitol in January, the Mormon church on its website defended the state's current liquor laws in a multimedia bulletin that include a 10-minute video.

The majority of Utah residents belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which teaches members to abstain from alcohol.

Powell brings the bill after visiting restaurants and other businesses in his district, which include high-end ski resorts along the Wasatch Mountains. He points to state data showing that 9 percent of alcohol consumption occurs in restaurants as opposed to bars, homes or elsewhere as evidence that the eateries have little effect on drinking rates.

"Guess what," he told the committee in a heated moment. "There are many people in this world and many people in Utah that when they eat, it is customary for them drink alcohol."

Hans Fuegi of Park City's Grub Steak Restaurant counseled lawmakers Tuesday that customers already use bars and restaurants for different purposes.

"It's very clear," he said. "Nobody goes to a restaurant to binge drink."

The existing barriers may conceal theft and often make diners question whether they're getting quality drinks, said restaurant owner Joel La Salle.

The barriers strike Rep. Jake Anderegg, R-Lehi, as bizarre but necessary. "I look at the Zion curtain through adult eyes," he said, and "it's the dumbest thing in the world." But they're worth it to prevent liquor from alluring youngsters, he said.

Heather Deuel, of Ogden, told lawmakers the rule makes little sense.

Deuel said she doesn't drink but she thinks teens would more likely take up alcohol due to movies, TV, and peer pressure rather than restaurant protocol.

Powell's proposal would require restaurants choosing to take down partitions to post a sign out front and on menus, indicating they pour liquor in public view. It would also bar minors in restaurants from coming a certain distance within bar seating.

Brian King, D-Salt Lake City, praised those provisions as a good tool for parents concerned about underage drinking.

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