

Tenn. Governor Signs Supermarket Wine Bill

LUCAS L. JOHNSON II, Associated Press



Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam signs a bill to allow supermarket wine sales into law on Thursday, March 20, 2014, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP Photo/Mark Humphrey)

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Folks waiting for the neighborhood grocery store to stock their favorite merlot or chardonnay may have to wait a little longer even though Gov. Bill Haslam has signed a law to allow [supermarket wine sales in Tennessee](#) [1].

The legislation signed Thursday grants authority to cities and counties that have package stores or liquor-by-the-drink sales to hold referendums on whether to allow wine sales in supermarkets. Even so, the earliest wine can be sold in supermarkets and convenience stores is the summer of 2016 — or a year later if they are located near an existing liquor store.

Senate Speaker Ron Ramsey told reporters Thursday that lawmakers may consider moving the date up.

"I predict that something may happen on that," said the Blountville Republican. "I just think that people won't understand why the grocery stores agreed to a year and a half delay."

The delay was to give liquor stores time to prepare for the competition.

However, Mitchell McDannald of Nashville said he hopes he can buy the wine sooner. He likes the wine sold in Trader Joe's stores and currently drives nearly four hours to Atlanta to get cases of it because he can't get it at any of the Trader Joe's stores in Tennessee.

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"I just like cheap wine," said the 27-year-old, who said that under the new law, "I'll be able to get the wine that I like" in Tennessee.

Haslam was joined Thursday by the measure's sponsors, as well as the Senate and House speakers, who helped the passage of the legislation by bringing different parties to the table to discuss it.

"I commend my legislators for their hard work," said House Speaker Beth Harwell, R-Nashville. "Together we all worked to make this a success today."

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.

While Tennessee is also a state with strong religious and conservative values, Vanderbilt University political science professor Bruce Oppenheimer said the delay to pass the measure was more about disagreements among the parties involved.

"I think there were people with money interests on both sides who had a stake in this game," he said. "It's the grocery stores against the people who run liquor stores."

Nevertheless, Sen. Bill Ketron, one of the measure's main sponsors, called the signing a historic event in Tennessee.

"There's an old saying that patience is a virtue," said the Murfreesboro Republican. "I can honestly say that I have acquired that virtue over the last seven years."

The measure also allows liquor stores to begin selling items other than booze.

Currently, supermarkets and convenience stores can sell beer containing up to 6.5 percent alcohol by volume. Anything stronger can be sold only in package stores, which can't sell anything beyond booze and lottery tickets.

Haslam's stance on the issue has warmed since the 2010 governor's race, when he expressed reservations about the legislation, which would directly affect the Pilot Flying J truck stop chain owned by the Haslam family.

He remained neutral on the issue while it was before lawmakers, but had pledged not to block its enactment once it passed.

"I've always said that I would do whatever the will of the Legislature is on this thing; and if they passed it that I would sign it," he told reporters after Thursday's event.

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