

*Counterpoint to Star Tribune editorial dated March 18, 2007. Submitted March 22, 2007.*

## **Improve Minnesota liquor laws? Let's start with preventing alcohol problems.**

If lawmakers overhaul Minnesota liquor laws as proposed in the March 18 editorial, they need to look beyond the narrow business concerns of the alcohol industry. Minnesota lawmakers should expand their scope beyond “profits” and “convenience” and take a hard look at what can be done for “public safety,” “public health,” and reducing “costs to society.” These issues are of far greater concern to the average Minnesotan than the internal battle among alcohol industry giants about expanding the locations where alcohol can be sold.

Lawmakers should consider three key facts: 1) alcohol is still the number one drug of choice for Minnesota adults and teens - and it causes great physical, social, and economic harm; 2) there are effective policies and programs that can impact alcohol abuse by adults and underage drinking – but they are severely under-funded; and 3) Minnesota taxpayers spend far more money dealing with alcohol-related problems than what is recovered through alcohol taxes. Let's look more closely at each of these issues:

**Alcohol use is the source of many community problems.** Alcohol use creates major public health and safety problems that impact everyone – not just those who drink. Consider these three startling facts:

- Each year, more than 30,000 people are arrested in Minnesota for DWI, and one of every eight Minnesota drivers has a DWI on their record. (Minnesota Department of Public Safety)
- Nearly two-thirds of high school seniors drink, and one-third drink five or more drinks at a time. (2004 Minnesota Student Survey)
- Police chiefs from around Minnesota estimate that four out of every five police calls are related to alcohol use.

**There are effective ways to treat alcohol abuse and reduce high-risk and underage drinking.** Studies show that every \$1 spent on treatment avoids up to \$7 in expense. Just this month the U.S. Surgeon General highlighted four effective ways to reduce teen drinking in a national “Call to Action:”

- *Enforce drinking age laws and other laws that reduce alcohol availability.* Enforcement should target underage drinkers, merchants who sell alcohol to youth, and people who provide alcohol to youth.
- *Involve parents in prevention.* Parents should establish family penalties for adolescent alcohol use, like losing the use of the car or not going out with friends.
- *Hold adults accountable* for underage drinking at house parties, even when those adults are not at home.
- *Increase the cost of alcohol.* Because teenagers are extremely price-sensitive, even a small increase in the cost of alcohol has an impact on underage alcohol use, particularly binge drinking.

**The costs generated by alcohol use impacts every Minnesota taxpayer's pocketbook.**



- State and local taxpayers pick up about 18% of alcohol-related costs - in Minnesota, that equals nearly \$1 billion per year, more than \$385 out of each taxpayer's pocket each year.
- The current Minnesota excise tax on alcohol is very low and well below the national average – just one penny on a glass of beer or wine. And to top it off, the Minnesota alcohol tax has not been increased in 20 years – not since the Twins won their first World Series in 1987.
- An additional \$112 million per year would be generated by increasing the alcohol excise tax by just a nickel per drink. The revenue could pay for increases in public safety, law enforcement, chemical dependency treatment, and programs to prevent alcohol problems.

Let's not look only at who will reap the profits from alcohol sales – let's also take a serious look at how we can reduce alcohol-related problems. Let's focus on strategies such as mandatory compliance checks with automatic penalties for bars, restaurants, or grocery stores that sell illegally to minors. Let's increase alcohol taxes so that those who drink more will pay more, and let's direct the funds to increase prevention, enforcement, and treatment programs. It's time to overhaul Minnesota alcohol laws to put more teeth and money into preventing alcohol-related problems. Let's face the facts about the terrible human and financial costs of alcohol use.

- submitted by Howard Epstein and Bob Melson, co-chairs of Minnesota Join Together, a grassroots coalition working to reduce underage drinking in Minnesota