

Public health and alcohol: Expert calls Utah 'envy of the nation'

By Dennis Romboy, Deseret News
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Utah Legislature 2014

Liquor laws

House speaker criticizes governor in opening address to Utah Legislature

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SALT LAKE CITY — Some state lawmakers might make another run this year at tearing down the so-called "Zion Curtain" in Utah restaurants that's designed to keep liquor bottles and drink dispensing out of diners' view.

They will have the backing of Utah House Speaker Becky Lockhart, a Provo Republican who calls the barrier "weird." She said it's "one little thing" the state could change to make Utah more attractive to new businesses.

But supporters of current law say such change runs counter to both the spirit and practical application of the Alcohol Beverage Control Act, the Utah state code that is required to look out for the public interest of both those who drink alcohol and those "who do not wish to be involved with alcoholic products."

The act's public safety concern requires the state to "promote the reduction of the harmful effects of: excess consumption of alcoholic products by adults; and consumption of alcoholic products by minors," the act states.

Those points were highlighted last week by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which issued a statement saying separate alcohol preparation areas are part of an effective system for protecting against underage drinking, overconsumption and driving under the influence of alcohol.

Liquor laws are a perennial topic at the Utah Legislature. As the 2014 session opened Monday, there were several alcohol-related bills in the works, but Sen. John Valentine, R-Orem, said he

doesn't expect any substantive changes this year. Most, if not all, liquor legislation in the state the past 20 years has run through the veteran senator.

But some inside and outside the Legislature have started conversations about privatizing liquor distribution and sales in Utah and lowering the blood alcohol level that defines drunken driving to 0.05 percent from 0.08 percent.

Utah best in nation

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"My attitude about alcohol in Utah is, I wouldn't mess with success," said David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

From a public health standpoint, he said, Utah is the "envy of the nation."

Jernigan attributed that in large part to Utah's religiosity but also to its "strong and intact" liquor control system.

But Lockhart said she's yet to see a study showing that the "Zion Curtain" has anything to do with the state's goals to reduce underage drinking, overconsumption and DUI.

State law requires restaurants to separate the pouring and mixing of alcoholic beverages from the dining area. Some eateries constructed partitions or walls, sometimes made of frosted glass, to comply, creating what has sometimes disparagingly come to be known as the Zion Curtain or Zion Wall.

"I have no interest in changing the fact that we're a control state. I have no interest in privatizing. I have no interest in putting alcohol other than beer in a grocery store. I have no interest in issues around heavy beer. I have no interest in making restaurants bars," Lockhart said.

"All I really want to talk about and learn about and come to terms with is this weird thing that we have that somewhere off in the distance in a restaurant there might be someone who is mixing a drink for a customer."