

Old Law May be Barred

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was in high school, one of my favorite shows was 'Cheers.' The ensemble cast was perfect and the writing was terrific. There was something comforting about a place where everybody knows your name.

Nearly everyone knows a Cliff or a Norm in their lives. Sometimes these folks wouldn't be in our lives but for our associations with dimly lit drinking establishments. While 'Cheers' may have been one of the longest-running and most popular comedies of all time, not everybody is laughing about the bars in Utah.

The Beehive State has a decades-old law that requires its residents to become members of any bar they patronize. To become members, prospective drinkers must pay a small fee and complete a brief application. While the taverns in Utah are open to the public, they are technically classified as private clubs so only members and sponsored guests may enter.

Utah has the strictest alcohol laws in the U.S., including one that allows victims of hit-and-run incidents or their families to sue the bar that overserved alcohol to the drunk driver that caused the accident. The genesis of these laws are believed to stem from Utah's predominantly Mormon population. About 60% of the state's residents belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which discourages drinking alcohol. Curiously, between 80% and 90% of Utah's legislators also belong to the LDS Church.

Cliff Claven would point out that it's a little known fact that Utah got its nickname as the Beehive State because the symbol is tied to the Mormon faith as a representation of the pioneer ideals of thrift and perseverance.

The members-only concept was intended to discourage the number of places residents would go to consume alcohol. In actuality, tavern owners claim the law equates to a cover charge and deters out-of-state visitors from imbibing.

The Utah Hospitality Association, which represents the fewer than 400 taverns and nearly 1,100 restaurants licensed to serve alcohol in the state (compared to over 12,000 in Wisconsin), has lobbied lawmakers to reconsider the membership law. The only problem is, they didn't anticipate the possibility of an even more draconian replacement being considered.

The State Senate has proposed to scan the IDs of every person who visits a bar in Utah and make that database available to law enforcement officials. Establishments would be equipped with electronic scanners that could determine if a patron was under the legal drinking age of 21. The information obtained from those scanners could be stored in a database and used by police to investigate drunken driving incidents.

Obviously, the proposal has met with opposition from bar owners, civil liberties groups and drinkers who believe it encroaches on individual privacy. The lawmakers behind the proposal claim the information gathered from the scanners would only be stored for a few hours and that only people's locations, not what or how much they were drinking or who they were with, would be collected. The Utah chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving supports some sort of monitoring system of club goers, but not necessarily a state-run database.

So if Utah's proposal goes through, not only will everyone in the bar know your name, but so will officials in the state government.

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