

Utah Law Receives Boos from Drinkers

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last month Tiger Woods was pulled over for operating his vehicle while being under the influence. While the arresting officer assumed Woods had been drinking, his drunk-like behavior was actually attributable to a reaction from a mixture of prescription medications.

Thankfully, officers like those who pulled over Woods are patrolling our streets and highways looking for drunk drivers to make it safer for the rest of us. It sounds like the officers' jobs are going to be a little tougher soon in Utah.

The Beehive State recently passed a law that lowered the legal blood alcohol limit from 0.08 to 0.05. Set to go into effect in 2018, the law now makes Utah the state with the lowest limit. State representative Norm Thurston sponsored the bill based on the recommendation made by the National Transportation Safety Board in 2013 to reduce the legal BAC limit nationwide to 0.05. Thurston says the measure will save lives by deterring people from drinking and driving.

CBS News asked why Thurston felt the need to lower the BAC limit when Utah already had the lowest DUI death rate in the nation. He pointedly replied, "We're not at zero."

Not surprisingly, there is a lot of opposition to the law. Restaurant and tavern owners strongly believe the new rule will hurt their businesses. The American Beverage Institute responded with an aggressive ad campaign, warning tourists traveling to Utah to "Come for vacation, leave on probation." According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, under the new law, an average 160-pound man would be considered legally drunk after drinking just two drinks in one hour. Restaurant and bar owners claim that will significantly hurt their sales.

The proposal is just the newest of several strict laws in Utah that govern the consumption of alcohol. These laws are believed to be due to the predominance of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which forbids the consumption of alcohol. Utah has over 14 million Mormons, which comprise more than 60% of the state's population.

One such law involves the use of what are commonly known as "Zion Curtains." The nickname, whose name is a nod to the church's roots, is a seven-foot tall barrier that blocks patrons, particularly children, from seeing mixed drinks being made. The curtain is intended to make drinking less glamorous and force restaurants to focus on the food.

Many businesses complied with the rule by surrounding the bar with frosted glass or mixing drinks in a back room. Either way, the requirement resulted in strange layouts for restaurants, especially national chains that have uniform architecture.

However, this is one alcohol law Utah recently relaxed. Zion Curtains can now be taken down so long as restaurants either create an adults-only zone that prevents minors from being seated within 10 feet of their bar, known as the "Zion Moat." Alternatively, they can seat minors 5 feet away if they erect some sort of barrier, like a railing or a shorter wall, which has yet to be definitively described.

So while restaurant and bar owners are still trying to repeal the law lowering the BAC to 0.05 before it goes into effect, they are happy about the ability to take down their Zion Curtains. It's not quite the Berlin Wall, but they'll take it.

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