

## Proposed Sunday Liquor Sales Get Mixed Reviews

The General Assembly might soon consider legislation to repeal the ban.

By Cathryn J. Prince-Wilton Patch, January 29, 2011

Not wearing white after Labor Day is a tradition some Connecticut Yankees hold dear. But closed liquor stores on Sundays?

"Connecticut is an anachronism in that regard," said state Rep. Jonathan Steinberg (D-136), who represents Westport.

Connecticut remains the sole New England state to still follow so-called Blue Laws. Only 13 other states in the country ban liquor sales on Sunday. But the General Assembly might soon consider legislation to repeal the ban. So far the proposal has earned reviews as mixed as planter's punch.

Some say it will help raise needed revenue.

"Our state will gain millions in new revenue from Sunday alcohol sales, revenue that is badly needed as we work towards digging ourselves out of a projected large deficit," the bill's author state Rep. Kathy Tallarita (D-58) said in a written statement.

But others question the validity of the Enfield representative's claims. They say the revenue argument masks the real objective.

"If the objective is for consumer choice, then just say that. But it seems they [the supporters] are hanging their hat on revenue for a cash strapped state," said Mitch Ancona, owner of Ancona's Wines & Liquors.

Ancona owns stores in Ridgefield and Wilton. The business owner said it's unclear how much revenue the state could actually raise.

Indeed no one has furnished a study that demonstrates projected revenue should the ban be repealed.

"They are flying blind," said UConn Director for Economic Analysis Fred Carstensen referring to the bill's supporters. "They have no idea what the impact would be. But I could create a story where Sunday sales are systematically injurious to quality of life stores."

The Connecticut Package Stores Association subscribes to Carstensen's theory. According to CPSA, allowing stores to sell liquor on Sundays will hurt small liquor stores already facing tough competition from big box chains.

These smaller stores say Sunday sales could force them to shutter their doors. The state could lose liquor stores and up to 500 jobs, according to CPSA.

"My inclination would be against repealing the ban," state Rep. John Hetherington (R-135) said. "This would be very hard on the small proprietor. It would make it very difficult for them to compete with the large chain stores."

Hetherington, who represents New Canaan and parts of Wilton, said he hasn't seen any analysis that would persuade him to allow Sunday sales. On the contrary, he said it "can hurt the economy for small towns."

Still the big box stores, such as Norwalk-based Stew Leonard's, said allowing Sunday sales could be a boon.

“We understand that smaller stores might feel an initial pinch if the laws changed and liquor stores were allowed to open on Sundays, however in the current economic environment, there are more people looking for work than there are jobs available,” said Meghan Bell, Director of Public Relations, for Stew Leonards. “We hope that liquor stores opening on Sundays would translate not only to additional revenue, but to the creation of new jobs.”

That’s unlikely, said Rick Franco, owner of New Canaan’s Francos Wine Merchants.

While the Elm Street store has ample staff to handle a Sunday opening, others may not, Franco said.

“Whatever happens we’ll roll on with that,” Franco said of the 78-year-old store. “Ultimately I’m not really sure what the state hopes to accomplish with this. People aren’t gong to drink more. I’m not sure it’s going to be the huge windfall they say it is.”

That’s precisely the point, said Carstensen.

It will cost smaller shops significantly more to stay open on Sundays. But it won’t cost larger stores anything since they’re already open, Carstensen said.

Moreover, the argument that a Sunday repeal will raise needed revenue doesn’t hold water, he said.

“When you buy at big stores most of the money flows out of state,” Carstensen said. “If smaller stores lose business and then go out of business, the state will lose property tax and revenue. The movement to open Sundays may actually hurt the state and not help it on a macro level.”

Steinberg said he understands the concern among smaller stores that the greatest beneficiaries to a repeal are grocery stores. However, it ultimately comes down to consumer choice.

Yet state Rep. John Frey (R-111) said he doesn’t get the sense that his constituents in Ridgefield are clamoring for Sunday sales.

“It’s just not a big issue for this part of the state, and I’m hesitant to think there will be much revenue gain,” Frey said.

However, Stew Leonards’ Bell differs.

“Opening wine and liquor stores on Sundays will generate revenue for the state in addition to serving a public convenience,” Bell said. “Business is lost when Connecticut residents are forced to do their liquor shopping in New York State on Sundays. Those shoppers crossing state lines — particularly those in Fairfield County’s border towns like Greenwich and Danbury — would most likely choose to shop locally on Sundays if the option was available.”

Yet, that’s all anecdotal evidence said Carstensen.

“Show me a good study with comprehensive data that analyzes cross border purchases, revenue gain,” he said. “Otherwise I’m reluctant to go with Sunday sales.”

And should stores sell liquor on Sundays it’s not going to reflect an increased consumption, Ancona said. It will be because people spread their purchases out over seven days rather than the current allotted six. “It’s not that people are abstaining on Sundays,” Ancona said.