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Florida perspective

Preserving a state's alcohol control

By **Bill Stephens**

Underage drinking affects everyone in our communities, not just our children. Children who drink are more likely to engage in other unhealthy or even criminal behavior, and they are more likely to be involved in fatal automobile accidents.

Sadly, underage drinking is all too common in Florida. According to the 2003 Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey, more than half of all high school seniors in Florida consumed alcohol in the past month, and 16 percent reported binge drinking.

Our children are already finding ways to obtain alcohol, but now a new way could potentially open up for them — the Internet.

Armed with nothing more than a credit card number, teenagers could order beer, wine or liquor over the computer, and have it delivered to their homes.

The state of Florida currently exercises tight controls over this method of selling alcohol products.

Wholesalers and retailers must be licensed to sell in the state, and they are held criminally accountable if a minor obtains beer, wine or spirits.

In Florida, it is a felony to ship alcohol directly to a home from out-of-state in violation of state law.

Florida's laws reflect the values of its people, and Floridians place a high value on protecting children from the dangers of underage drinking.

Those values are now being attacked by people who want to sell beer, wine and liquor over the Internet, without regard for Florida law. In a U.S. Supreme Court case now pending, out-of-state alcohol sellers are attacking the 21st Amendment, which gives all states the power to regulate the shipment of alcohol products across their borders.

Out-of-state sellers and delivery drivers do not hold licenses to sell alcohol in Florida and are not accountable for their actions. If we are forced to allow the unregulated sale of alcohol by unlicensed Web sites, more of our state's minors will be able to purchase alcohol. It's that simple.

Anonymous Internet sales of beer, wine and spirits by out-of-state companies, rather than face-to-face sales, take away the best method we have to stop kids from obtaining alcohol.

Profits have driven some Internet sellers to look for ways to weaken our state's safeguards against underage drinking. If they should prevail in the nation's highest court, booze will flow more freely into our homes, and our children and families will suffer.

Out-of-state sellers say that kids will not be able to use the Internet to buy alcohol, and that delivery drivers will check IDs. Unfortunately, that's not true.

Many Web sites will sell beer, wine and liquor to anybody with a credit card, and a date of birth is easy to fake online. By ensuring that all alcohol sales in Florida are conducted by licensed businesses, our state can make sure that they are fully accountable for any violations.

If they break the law and sell to children, they can be held fully accountable to the authorities and to the people of our state.

Florida has a system that works. We should be looking for ways to make it work better, not opening the door to deregulation of alcohol sales. That's a path that will undoubtedly reduce our controls and increase underage drinking.

We simply cannot sit idly by and allow others to put Florida children at risk!

The writer, of Orlando, is executive director of the Christian Coalition of Florida.