

Eroding Internet alcohol sales ban would put youth at risk

By Jay Romine
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As we all know, children and alcohol do not mix. That's why Florida law has safeguards that prevent underage persons from purchasing alcohol products.

Unfortunately, the lure of easy profit has driven Internet sellers of beer, wine and spirits to wage a battle to weaken these safeguards and allow unregulated and anonymous sales across state lines, opening a new way for minors to obtain alcohol. The latest clash is now being fought in the U.S. Supreme Court, where Internet alcohol sellers are attacking the constitutional foundation of Florida's laws restricting alcohol sales to minors.

At the heart of the debate in the Supreme Court is an attack on the 21st Amendment, which explicitly gives states the power to regulate the transportation or importation of "intoxicating liquors." In Florida, it is a felony to import alcohol directly into the state in violation of state law.

If we take away that power to regulate alcohol sales, there will be no practical way to stop underage persons from clicking on an Internet site and having beer, wine or liquor delivered directly to them.

The Florida Police Chiefs Association is strongly opposed to allowing beer, wine or liquor to be sold directly over the Internet or through the mail by out-of-state businesses that bypass our state's legal safeguards.

This is a time for all Floridians to voice their support of the laws that require alcohol to be sold only through licensed businesses that are accountable for violations. The law protects our children, and it ensures that there is an effective way to enforce community values in Florida.

Online sellers say that teenagers will not use the Internet to buy alcohol products, and that shipping companies will only deliver to adults. However without our state's legal safeguards any teenager with access to a credit card can find numerous Web sites that sell beer, wine and liquor. Numerous stories from around the country show just how easily teenagers can buy alcohol over the Internet.

A sting conducted by the Massachusetts attorney general resulted in charges against several online vendors and the top three shipping companies for delivering alcohol to underage college students without checking ID.

A law enforcement investigation conducted by the Michigan attorney general's office also found that underage children were easily able to buy alcohol, noting that most online alcohol sellers were more worried about the validity of the credit card number than the age of the buyer.

The situation is likely to get worse. In Maine, UPS is challenging a law requiring its drivers to check for ID before delivering tobacco, saying the requirement is a burden. If checking ID for tobacco shipments is too difficult, can we really expect shipping companies to monitor alcohol sales?

Florida has a system that requires alcohol purchases to pass from licensed manufacturers to licensed distributors and finally to consumers through licensed retailers. At every step in the process, there are measures that ensure alcohol sales are properly regulated, and that children are not allowed access.

Kids do not need another way to buy alcohol. The system works, and it is worth preserving.

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