



12 Jul 2018

Alcohol abuse opponents decry progress of SB 905

SACRAMENTO — Non-profit groups focused on alcohol abuse are unhappy about a committee vote last month that will allow a controversial bill enabling cities to extend hours of night clubs and bars to extend hours to 4 a.m. to move forward.

Alcohol Justice and the California Alcohol Policy Alliance say the state Assembly's Governmental Organization Committee's decision last month to approve SB 905, sponsored by Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, is irresponsible.

"Given the overwhelming evidence that two more hours of alcoholic beverage sales would increase deaths and injuries, a majority by one vote of this negligent committee took the side of the project's author. They ignored the violence in the streets, the visits to emergency rooms, drunk drivers and traffic chaos," said Bruce Lee Livingston, executive director and President of Alcohol Justice.

Deaths from drunk driving are a chronic problem and getting worse in California.

"We saw an increase in deaths in traffic accidents in 2016, an increase of 16.2 percent, when more than a thousand people lost their lives in crashes caused by drunk drivers," said Lynne Brown, program manager and liaison with the authorities of Mothers against Drunk Drivers.

"In a continuing display of hypocrisy, Sen. Wiener once again evoked the trauma of losing an aunt in a crash caused by a drunk driver, stating that he would never do anything that would cause that harm to others," said Michael Scippa, Director of Public Affairs in Alcohol Justice.

"However, this is the second bill that has been drafted, and that will surely increase the current annual catastrophe of damage caused by alcohol in California. His statement challenges common sense. Furthermore, by saying that the testimony of the opponents is 'hyperbole' he insulted the experts and the peer-reviewed scientific conclusions that show that there is more damage if alcoholic beverages are sold two or more hours later," added Scippa.

SB 905 previously passed the State Senate in May, and now moves to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, which must approve the bill by Aug. 17.

The new 5-year pilot program version of the LOCAL Act, which stands for Let Our Communities Adjust Late-Night, preserves complete local control in terms of decision-making and applies only to the seven cities whose mayors have expressed interest in pursuing later hours: San Francisco, Oakland, Los Angeles, Sacramento, West Hollywood, Long Beach, and Palm Springs.

The LOCAL Act continues to have bipartisan and geographically diverse support. In addition to Senator Wiener's lead authorship, the bill is co-authored by Senators Ricardo Lara, D-Long Beach, and Ben Allen, D-Santa Monica, and Assemblymembers Miguel Santiago, D-Los Angeles; Jay Obernolte, R-Hesperia, and Reggie-Jones Sawyer, D-Los Angeles.

Wiener said SB 905 does not automatically extend alcohol sale hours in these cities — it simply creates the option for the cities to choose to extend hours. As with the previous bill, cities will have significant flexibility and can, for example, limit extended hours only to certain neighborhoods, only to certain nights of the week, or only to a few nights a year. Local governments still will have to create and approve a plan, which ABC will also have to approve, to allow for later service hours with full community input. The bill also has a five-year sunset, which means the effects of allowing later service hours can be evaluated and then renewed or discontinued after five years.

“Nightlife is vital to many of our cities throughout California, and we need to do more to let these cities find ways to promote and support nightlife,” said Sen. Wiener. “This bill gives cities the ability to extend hours wherever and however it works best for them, whether that’s in limited neighborhoods, certain nights a week, or only on a few nights a year. By taking this nuanced approach to empower — but not require — local communities to extend alcohol sales hours, we can support nightlife in California.”

In response to Wiener's assertion that SB 905 is a measure of “local control,” there was a consensus among opponents that there is no such thing as local control in alcohol policy and that the harm of a decision of the municipality to change the time of the last call in the bars will “splash” all nearby communities.

SB 905, like three other bills to keep bars open until 4 a.m. in the past 15 years, will increase excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages, loss of life, injuries and discomfort in the state, opponents say.

Carson Benowitz-Fredericks, director of research at Alcohol Justice, summarized the existing evidence that supports how the serious effects of extending sales of alcoholic beverages would spread to “Affected Zones” surrounding the seven cities mentioned in the bill.

He also commented that “a true ‘pilot project’ would encompass a small sample, not the 76 percent of the state’s population that will be exposed to additional alcohol-related damage if SB 905 becomes law.”

The specialist considered that the bill lacks language that details the collection or analysis of data, or the way to pay for the pilot project.

“The scientific data clearly points out the dangers of leaving bars in California open two extra hours, as proposed by Sen. Wiener’s bill, SB 905,” said Ramón Castellblanch, president of Quality Healthcare Concepts and Professor Emeritus of Health Education at San Francisco State University.

The professor said alcohol-related harm will increase, according to research by a team based at the Centers for Disease Control of the United States and after his rigorous analysis of all available research.

“Sen. Wiener’s claim that there is no correlation between extending bar hours and crashes caused by drunk drivers totally ignores the dozens of factors that confuse an analysis of a collision state classification caused by drunk drivers.”

“His affirmation is not an investigation in any sense; it is only an obfuscation of the dangers of this project, backed by the industry,” he said.