

Supermarket wine bill defeated

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Hundreds of liquor-store owners flooded the Capitol on Wednesday and defeated a bill that would have expanded shoppers' access to beer and wine and recast the fortunes of thousands of Colorado businesses.

The proposal to allow supermarkets, convenience stores and big-box retailers to sell wine and full-strength beer died on a 5-1 vote Wednesday evening after more than two hours of emotional testimony from small-business owners.

At least one lawmaker cautioned the liquor-store owners — who erupted into applause at the death of Senate Bill 149 — that booze in grocery stores is inevitable and they should start planning for the extra competition.

"I believe this concept is one whose time is coming," said Sen. Betty Boyd, D-Lakewood. She wants to "give independent small businesses ways to think ahead."

The defeat puts new pressure on groceries and convenience stores to kill another bill that would allow liquor stores to open on Sundays and compete with grocers for beer buyers. That proposal cleared its first hurdle Wednesday and heads to the Senate Finance Committee.

Consumers have signaled they want the convenience of buying a bottle of wine with their groceries, backers of the defeated bill said.

But their pleas were no match for passionate testimony from liquor-store owners such as Jeanne McEvoy of Loveland, who said a nearby grocery store would put her out of business with nearly \$1 million in debt over her head.

"To have the grocery-store competition 20 yards away from my front door I can't pay the bills. I will be closed. And there won't be another liquor store that comes into that location," said McEvoy, who brought the crowd to its feet in cheers with her impassioned speech.

Also worried Wednesday were:

Craft breweries and local vintners, who were afraid of being shut out of shelf space by out-of-state chain groceries.

Convenience stores, which can only sell less-potent 3.2 percent alcohol beer. They fear that the bill allowing liquor stores to open and sell full-alcohol beer on Sundays would eat up their Sunday profits.

Opponents of underage drinking, who were concerned about introducing alcohol into family-friendly stores.

In its final form, the grocery-sales bill sponsored by Sen. Brandon Shaffer, D-Longmont, would not have required food stores to set aside space for craft beer and boutique wine — a departure from previous versions.

It also would have increased from one to three the number of shops liquor-store owners could operate and would allow them to sell snacks for the first time.

Shaffer worked with liquor industry groups from all levels to craft the legislation.

"We did have a very good conversation," he told the committee in his closing statement, which came past 8:30 p.m. "And I acknowledge that we're all exhausted."

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