

PUT DRINKERS ON THE LIQUOR COMMISSION

The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: May 12, 1994. pg. A.16

Copyright Salt Lake Tribune May 12, 1994

The terms of two of the five members of the Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission expire July 1. Gov. Mike Leavitt should use this opportunity to appoint two drinkers to the commission.

The reason is simple. Among its duties, the powerful liquor commission decides, within the limits of state law, the number and location of state liquor stores, package agencies and other outlets for alcoholic beverages, including restaurants, taverns and private clubs. It grants and revokes permits for these outlets, and it sets the price of liquor and wine. With the help and advice of experts, it also decides what brands and vintages of beverages are sold in the state.

In short, if you buy a bottle of liquor, a mixed drink, a glass of wine or a beer in Utah, the terms of your purchase are dictated by state law and the decisions of the liquor commission. There should be people on the commission who are consumers of the product that is being regulated and have some personal experience with the system, especially when the rules are as arcane as they are in Utah.

There also should be some representation for the hospitality industry. The appointment of someone who owns, operates or works for a business regulated by the commission -- a restaurant with a liquor license, for example -- would not be appropriate because of conflict of interest. However, perhaps someone could be found who has the requisite business experience but no current direct involvement in any enterprise that is licensed by the commission.

In some eyes, it would be an invasion of personal privacy to ask potential appointees to the commission whether or not they drink, but that presupposes that people who imbibe alcoholic beverages have something to be ashamed of or are guilty of some moral failing. And it's true that some people don't distinguish between a glass of wine with dinner (or a beer at the ballpark) and drunkenness.

But while many Utahns are of the opinion that drinking is immoral or contrary to religious teachings, others disagree. The point is that there is a spectrum of opinion about alcohol consumption in Utah, and the makeup of the liquor commission should reflect that diversity. In the past, it has tended to represent only one view.

A liquor commissioner's personal moral views, drinking habits and experience with alcohol abuse are bound to affect his or her votes. People who argue otherwise are kidding themselves. So it would be both relevant and proper for the governor to inquire directly about these views when seeking potential appointees.

Like many other government bodies, the liquor commission should attempt to reflect a range of opinion that mirrors the diversity of views in the community. Gov. Leavitt has an opportunity to broaden the makeup and outlook of the commission, and he should seize it.