

Do you want more booze-buying options?

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The provincial alcohol sales debate is enough to drive people to drink or the exact opposite.

Proponents tell you Ontario's alcohol retailing system, legislated in 1927, is out of date and touch with the surveyed demands of some 67 per cent of adults who want to buy their booze at neighbourhood convenience stores.

Opponents, such as MADD Canada, remind us alcohol costs lives and big dollars. The anti-drinking and driving organization noted of the average 2,541 Canadians killed each year in motor vehicles crashes, about 40 per cent were impairment-related and, using a social cost model, impairment-related driving deaths, injuries and property damage crashes in Canada cost an estimated \$20.62 billion in 2010.

Champions of relaxed liquor sale laws suggest thousands of new sales jobs would be created.

Those opposing say taxpayers would have to bankroll more inspectors and ask why we would want to invite more alcohol-fuelled carnage.

QUEEN'S PARK PETITION

Last summer, after an Ipsos Reid study for the Ontario Convenience Stores Association showed two-thirds of respondents wanted expanded alcohol purchasing options, a petition, signed by 112,500 signalling their support for beer and wine in convenience stores, was delivered to Queen's Park.

While that's not quite 1 per cent on the province's population, association CEO Dave Bryans lobbied hard with numbers.

Citing a 2011 independent study that looked at the job the LCBO, the Beer Store and chain convenience stores do with age checks, he said one in four minors successfully purchased age-restricted products from LCBO, and one in five from The Beer Store, compared to one in eight for convenience stores.

Not much has changed legislatively in a year, let alone the level of angst on both sides of the wrangle.

Last week, 60 Ontario Mac's Convenience locations launched the Free Our Beer in-store campaign. The drive features a poster of an open fridge that holds shelves of ice-cold beer and asks, "What if you could buy beer here?" It also invites consumers to sign an online petition at freeourbeer.ca, which supports the call for alcohol products to be sold at convenience stores in the province.



More than 300,000 Ontarians have signed on, Mac's operations vice-president Tom Moher said.

The Mac's campaign is a fun, creative way of showing customers what the inside of their Mac's store may well look like, perhaps not so long from now, he said in a media release

Reiterating the association's survey that almost seven of 10 age-of-majority consumers want to buy alcohol at corner stores, Mr. Moher speculated the move would create 1,600 new, full-time jobs by permitting the sale of beer, wine and spirits at its 547 Ontario stores. Ontario would also benefit

from increased revenues if alcohol was permitted for sale in convenience stores, he said.

Selling alcohol outside the LCBO and Beer Store is not in the best interest of public safety, MADD Canada CEO Andrew Murie argued.

"It's not necessary," he said bluntly. "Convenience stores' pure motivation is profit. With dwindling tobacco sales, alcohol is the replacement. Look at recent tobacco and lottery issues. Why give them beer and wine?"

Convenience store chains and their professional associations are maneuvering proactively, inventing desire and asking consumers to blindly board the bandwagon, Mr. Murie said.

"No one is really asking for this," he said. "They're encouraging people to sign a petition, but they're not giving the full facts."

Under Canada's constitution, responsibility for enacting laws and regulations regarding the sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages in Canada is the sole responsibility of the provinces. Canada's territories have also been granted similar autonomy over these matters under the provisions of federal legislation.

As such, Mr. Murie points to privatization in Alberta and British Columbia. In those provinces, government alcohol outlets have an 80-per-cent compliance against serving minors, while private dis-

THE ALCOHOL SALES DEBATE BY THE NUMBERS

19 — age for legal alcohol purchase or consumption in BC, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, Nova Scotia, Nunavut, Ontario, PEI, Saskatchewan and Yukon. In Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec, 18 is the legal age.

68% — respondents in favour of corner store liquor sales, according to an online CBC poll this week.

2 — number of provinces that allow the sale of beer in convenience stores. Quebec has the loosest laws, allowing for the sale of a wide range of beer and wine at grocery stores and convenience stores. In Newfoundland, you can purchase locally brewed beers at select convenience stores.

\$20.38 — amount Canadians spent at beer and liquor stores in 2011.

\$4.7B — net sales for the LCBO for 2011.

\$1.6B — amount, before taxes, trans-

ferred to the Ontario government from these sales.

\$278.7M — the increase in revenue to the Alberta government annually after the privatization of liquor sales in the province in 1993.

65 — number of alcohol-related medical conditions on file.

32% — Canadians who experienced problems in the past year due to the drinking by others.

4,258 — Canadians who died in 2002 as a result of alcohol.

\$7.7B — annual Canadian alcohol revenue in 2002.

— Sources: MADD Canada, National Alcohol Strategy, Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health



It's something I've given a lot of thought to as it seems to work in other places, but it makes me hesitate to say yes — will it be easier for younger people to get? That's the part that concerns me.

Keith Jean-Marie, Stouffville

see video at yorkregion.com

tributors have achieved only 29 per cent.

Government regulated stores train staff to be vigilant against minors, refusing to sell to intoxicated customers and to call 911 if a person under the influence attempts to drive.

Convenience store employees tend to work alone, are young and are more likely to sell alcohol without question to underage friends.

As well, private outlets tend to sell beer and wine at higher prices, he said, noting Alberta has the priciest alcohol in Canada.

MADD Canada's goal is not to prohibit the legal, responsible consumption of alcohol, he said. However, when alcohol is over-consumed, it imposes tremendous costs on drinkers and the people and communities around them.

If the system is not broken, there's no need to fix it, Conservative Newmarket-Aurora MPP Frank Klees said, adding the province has a system of distribution that works quite well.

Mr. Klees believes the strategy to privatize Ontario alcohol sales is short-sighted.

It's not in the best interest of the public or convenience stores, he said, noting doing so would have unintentional consequences.

He speculated few have considered the logistics of storing inventory, cost of administration and regulatory enforcement.

Selling alcohol outside government outlets also has serious social implications, Mr. Klees said.

Granting convenience stores the right to sell alcohol will not happen until new legislative rules and regulations are in place, he said, adding that's not a simple process.

Rather than a focus on more alcohol sales outlets, Ontario should ramp up drink and driving education and enforcement, Mr. Klees said.