

The election eye . . .

# Retail wine proposal looks like a winner

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The bubbling retail wine proposal that most likely will appear on the Nov. 4 general election ballot looks strong.

More than 8,000 names were gathered for the petitions, about a third of the 25,000 expected to vote at the general election. However, there is some question as to whether the necessary 6,438 signatures, or 20 percent of the 32,188 registered voters in the 1978 general election, will remain after ineligible signatures are eliminated. Past records show some 20 percent are generally eliminated from petitions.

The refusal by all three county commissioners, Chairman Clyde R. Burtenshaw, Tom Loertscher and Wylie Snarr, to let the voters decide the question fairly at the election could become a campaign issue in 1982. Burtenshaw and Loertscher encounter no contest in this general election and Snarr is not up for election for two more years.

Another person who took a stand against the proposal was Sheriff Blaine Skinner, who faces a tough fight in this election against Democrat Richard Ackerman, veteran city police detective, and his remarks might not help his chances.

In 1972, the retail wine proposal attracted 14,862 votes, of which 8,435 voted against and 6,427 in favor, or a percentage of 57 to 43 in opposition. This means a switch of some 1,000 votes could have reversed the results.

However, there are different factors now which would indicate a shift of voters in favor of the proposal.

Perhaps the main one is that the retail sale of wines in grocery stores has not created the deplorable law enforcement situation the opponents charged. Retail wine sales are permitted in 32 of Idaho's 44 counties and there appear to be no problems. Packaged beer sales are allowed in the grocery stores anyway and packaged wine sales at the same outlets would not appear to add much, if any, to the problems.

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In 1972, this wine proposal was presented at a special election where the opposition was able to concentrate its fire. This year, it's different. There are a number of bristling election contests which diffuse the controversy on the wine issue.

So far, there appears little organized opposition, although it is likely developing.

J. Kent Just, former Greater Idaho Falls Chamber of Commerce executive vice president, who is spearheading the proposal, emphasizes the issue is one of economics, not of morals. He cites the loss of business from this area to Pocatello and other places where retail wine sales are permitted.

However, this assessment is hardly accurate because any time an alcohol beverage subject is considered, no matter in what capacity, is carries some moral implication.

Only Bonneville County among the larger counties of the state doesn't permit retail wine sales. There are 11 other counties, most of them in East Idaho. Besides Bonneville, other counties with a "no no" are Bingham, Madison, Jefferson, Fremont, Teton, Butte, Oneida, Franklin, Caribou, Bear Lake and Cassia.

Claud Rogers, accountant at the State Liquor Dispensary at Boise, gives some interesting figures. Of the \$426,764.20 in wine sales by the state liquor stores in fiscal 1980, \$267,799.1150, or 62 percent, were in Idaho Falls.

Of the 131 state liquor stores, wine is sold in only 18, said Rogers.

Rogers said the state is anxious to divest itself of wine sales because it makes up only about 1 percent of the total alcohol sales but the state has to deal with eight or more separate wine distributors to stock its shelves, making for considerable accounting.

Liquor sales last year amounted to about \$40.5 million, an increase from the \$38.7 million of the preceding year.

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In 1972, the two Republican Bonneville County commissioners, Chairman Dean Huntsman and Orval Forbes, took an aggressive hostile stand to the proposal in rejecting approval. This also forced a petition signing to get it on the ballot. As result of this and other issues, both Huntsman and Forbes were defeated in their bid for re-election at the next election. This year, the three county commissioners denied the Just request but they did not show harsh animosity. They apparently rested their case on the defeat of the proposal in 1972.

However, Sheriff Skinner placed himself in the opposition

camp by saying the proposal would create more law enforcement problems.

He said privately-employed store clerks are usually less stringent about checking proof-of-age cards than clerks in liquor stores. The result, he avers, will be a high number of juveniles buying wine illegally.

"Therefore, we'll be making more arrests of clerks and embarrassing merchants," he was quoted as saying.

Skinner says retail sales would also result in far more detention of juveniles on accusations of illegal consumption of alcohol. Because of its higher alcohol content, many juveniles would switch from beer to wine consumption to, in his own words, "get a little drunker quicker."

He then says clerks and store owners who sell wine to juveniles, those under 19, would be subject to arrest, which they should be.

Skinner then contends that easier access to wine is going to mean higher consumption, adding the workload for law enforcement will cost more than proceeds channeled to county budget from sales tax.

Ackerman, Skinner's election opponent, said "I think this is something for the people to decide for themselves. It is a freedom of expression."

He declined to comment further.

The Skinner views, however, hardly square with the facts as other counties which do permit retail wine sales at grocery stores report no serious problems. C. Kelly Pearce, Boise, state law enforcement director, said a cursory survey shows no more crime problems in retail wine sale counties than in others.