

BEER BILLS AND SIN TAXES

Oregon didn't legislate your beer this year By Camilla Mortensen

For many beer drinkers, the first day of summer marks the time to move from the dark, chewy beers of winter to the lighter, more refreshing beers of the warm bright months. For Oregon's legislators, the first day of summer marks the last rush to kill bills in committee or get them a vote on the House or Senate floor before the session draws to a close. These two rather unlike issues came together this year when not one but two beer bills tried to make their way through Oregon's Legislature.

Oregon's biggest beer bill was what we like to call a "sin tax." The Beaver State doesn't have sales tax, but we do tax "sins" like beer and cigarettes. Sin taxes, or more properly sumptuary taxes, are taxes levied on socially proscribed activities like drinking, smoking and gambling.

Right now Oregon taxes eight-tenths of one cent (\$0.008) per bottle of beer, an amount Oregon Center for Public Policy's executive director Chuck Sheketoff called "sorely out of date" and "woefully inadequate" on a blog on the political website BlueOregon.com.

The beer excise tax would not have affected any of the microbreweries in the state, thanks to a compromise on the tax, because none of them produce the more than two million barrels annually that would have been the cutoff point for adding the tax.

But in the end, legislators decided that the tax, which would have raised the state's beer and wine tax by about 1,900 percent, along with a proposed 60-cent cigarette tax, was too much to add to lower and middle income Oregonians' financial burden during the current economic climate, and House Bill 2461 died this week. The money would have gone toward funding drug and alcohol prevention, treatment and recovery programs.

But those of you who fear even the slightest increase in price on your frothy malted beverages, it appears that you are not safe yet. An action alert that's being passed around by small brewers warns of a federal excise tax on alcoholic beverages being considered by the Senate Finance Committee as a part of healthcare reform deliberations.

The tax would be a uniform tax based on the alcohol content in the product, according to a Finance Committee document on healthcare reform. The document proposes to tax "sugar-sweetened beverages" as well. Apparently this is also a bit of a sin tax, since the tax would apply to beverages sweetened with sugar or high-fructose corn syrup but not to "non-caloric" sweeteners.

The "Honest Pint Act" wasn't a sin tax; it was, well, an effort to make pints honest. House Bill 3122 made it through Oregon's House in May, passing by a



All pints
are not
created equal.

34-26 vote. It targeted establishments that serve beer in 13 or 14 ounce glasses but charge customers "per pint" of beer. A pint, according to honestpintproject.org, is 16 fluid ounces of beer. "This requires retailers to serve beer in glasses of at least 18 ounces, but preferably 20 or more (the 'imperial pint' glasses imported from England and Ireland are ideal examples)," says the beer website.

The Honest Pint Project came out of Beervana blogger Jeff Alworth and software engineer Shawn Montague's efforts to rid the U.S. of so-called "cheater pints." The bill would have allowed bars to "obtain verification of capacity of

pint glasses used at licensed premises for draught malt beverages." Once verified, your local pub would have been able to display a sticker from Oregon Liquor Control Commission certifying it served an honest pint.

Alas, the Honest Pint Act died in the Senate Business and Transportation Committee. However, you can go to www.honestpintproject.org and participate in the grassroots effort to certify Oregon's beer drinking establishments. Thus far, no Eugene pub has been certified on the site, so Eugenean beer drinkers, it's time to get drinking, measuring and certifying.

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