

## Changes in attitudes, culture could affect alcohol vote

Stephanie Taylor (Staff Writer)

TUSCALOOSA | Thirteen years ago, a majority of the city's voters sent a clear message — they did not want alcohol sold on Sundays.

Of the 12,492 votes cast in that 1998 referendum, 6,771 — 54 percent — were against lifting the ban on Sunday alcohol sales in the city.

There have been many changes in the culture and landscape of the city since then. But have attitudes shifted enough to be reflected at the polls Tuesday, when the city holds another referendum on the question? And, if voters do approve the sale of alcoholic beverages on Sunday, what would the social consequences be?

In the years since the first referendum, nightlife options have expanded from a few dive bars filled with college students to include more upscale spots for professionals. The city invested millions of dollars to improve the look of the Strip and downtown, in part to spur economic development, and has imposed mandatory closing times on bars that didn't exist before.

There are more fine dining options, including restaurants that would likely serve Sunday brunch if mimosas and Bloody Marys had a place on the menu. Several sports bars have opened, giving fans more places to watch a Sunday afternoon ballgame while drinking a pitcher of beer.

And there's a new 7,470-seat amphitheater on the banks of the Black Warrior River, where Sunday concertgoers would probably line up for beer if they had a chance.

What hasn't changed is the deeply rooted religious tradition here and the institutional opposition to selling alcohol on Sundays. Member churches of the Tuscaloosa County Baptist Association have urged members to vote against the referendum Tuesday, as they did in 1998. The result of the referendum in 1998 is most often attributed to the strong turnout of those urged by church leaders to vote against it.

The rise of social media has given people in favor of Sunday sales an outlet to organize as well. In the 1998 referendum, 5,721 people voted to approve Sunday sales. This week, the number of people who had joined a Facebook group called "Permit Sunday Alcohol Sales in Tuscaloosa" exceeded that number by nearly 500 people. (It's unclear how many of those people are registered to vote in Tuscaloosa.)

Voters in five of the city's seven districts voted against Sunday sales in 1998. A majority of voters in District 3, which includes areas north of the Black Warrior River, and District 4, which includes the University of Alabama campus, were in favor. Of the 1,104 residents who signed up to vote in the week

before the registration deadline for Tuesday’s referendum, most live in District 4, which is heavily populated by students, according to the county Board of Registrars.

Predicting the turnout for Tuesday’s referendum based on the results from 1998 is difficult, however, and not just because of the changes that have occurred since then. The 1998 referendum was non-binding, meaning it wouldn’t have taken effect even if it had passed, and other measures were on the ballot that day as well. This Tuesday, only the Sunday sales issue will be voted on.

### **A lost war?**

UA political science professor emeritus Bill Stewart expects the measure will pass.

“Alcohol is not the big issue it was in Alabama when I was growing up,” he said. “I think even conservative evangelical churches realize that the ‘war’ was lost a long time ago.”

Stewart wrote a book-length study in the 1970s called “Government and Alcohol.” He noted that Alabama went dry five years before Prohibition began nationwide in 1920, and maintained the ban until 1937 — four years after national prohibition ended in 1933. Laws loosened as years passed, eventually allowing wet cities in dry counties. The required population for cities to vote on whether to allow alcohol sales has also decreased over the years, he said. Most recently, the Legislature passed a law in 2009 that lowered the population threshold to 1,000. The minimum previously was 7,000.

“I think most people realize there are more serious social problems — racism, poverty, unwed mothers, inadequate health care. I am a member of a conservative church and our minister has not mentioned the referendum nor has it been mentioned in any church publication that I am aware of. We are more focused on trying to feed the hungry, help those who are suffering through divorce, helping those who have problems with alcohol abuse or illegal drugs — as well as teaching the gospel,” he said.

Stewart grew up in Hartselle in Morgan County. The city is still dry, but residents can drive just a few miles to purchase alcohol.

“Some people may drink, but prefer a community where it isn’t sold because they think it represents a better quality of life than exists in a community with bars,” he said. Stewart doesn’t expect a large percentage of the city’s 67,009 registered voters to turn out.

In other cities in Alabama and neighboring states, voters have recently chosen to relax alcohol laws, whether as an economic boost during lean times or because of changed attitudes toward drinking.

The city of Auburn repealed Sunday restrictions after a 1999 referendum.

“Sunday is our quietest day of the week,” said Auburn Police Capt. Tom Stouffer. “We’ve seen no adverse effects from Sunday alcohol sales.”

The city of Starkville, home of Mississippi State University 85 miles west of Tuscaloosa, approved Sunday

sales in 2009.

Starkville Police Capt. Chris Thomas said that law enforcement officers haven't noticed a subsequent increase in alcohol-related or other crime on Sunday that could be attributed to allowing alcohol sales.

He said that DUI arrests in the city have increased every day of the week.

"Our DUIs have picked up in general, so it's hard to say whether Sunday sales have contributed to it," he said.

Sunday alcohol sales were permitted in Madison, near Huntsville, in the 1990s. Police Chief Larry Muncey said that DUIs there have decreased since then.

Tuscaloosa Police Chief Steve Anderson said that weekends are always busy for the department.

"I don't think that having Sunday alcohol sales is going to cause a crowd like you see on Friday night or Saturday night," he said.

Sunday sales could, however, have an impact on illegal shot houses where people sell alcohol from their homes without a license. Shot houses operate every day of the week, and are often places where people also gamble or sell illegal drugs.

"I'm not sure if it would put an end to shot houses being open on Sundays, but I think it would reduce the demand and their number of customers," Anderson said.

Researchers conducted a study in Canada after Ontario allowed Sunday sales in 1997. They determined that drinking increased by 7 to 15 percent on Sundays, but decreased on other days of the week.

"We found evidence of substitution away from drinking on Saturdays and no evidence for increases in overall drinking," the researchers wrote in their report, published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* in 2009.

"Our results suggest that repealing Sunday sales prohibitions is unlikely to result in increased overall alcohol consumption, although such liberalizations may change the within-week distribution."

### **'Not all change is for the better'**

That's one of the points that attorney and former Tuscaloosa City Councilman Joe Powell made when asked his opinion about Sunday sales.

He questioned the argument that Sunday alcohol sales would increase revenue, speculating that people making Sunday purchases would just be changing the day they bought it. He also questioned the claim that Tuscaloosa is not a suitable convention location because there are no Sunday alcohol sales. Drinks have been free, not for sale, at every convention he's attended as a lawyer and councilman, he said.

During Powell's two terms on the council between 1997 and 2005, he was often the lone dissenter on measures related to increasing the availability of alcohol.

“My perception, as a council member and still today, is that there’s a reason why alcohol is a highly regulated product and that’s because it’s dangerous,” he said. “The question I always asked, but no one could ever answer, is where is the empirical evidence that shows what we are losing by maintaining the tradition we have now? Change is good, most of the time. But not all change is for the better.”

Powell said that he has always been against Sunday sales because of a family tradition. As a child, he would eat at restaurants with his grandparents on Sundays.

“That was the one day a week that they did not have to be concerned about alcohol being served around us,” he said.

“We didn’t have to worry about smelling it or being close to folks who drank too much of it and got loud and boisterous. We knew it was ‘safe’ to eat on Sundays. Is that too much to protect nowadays?”

Increased crime?

Some opponents of Sunday sales say that increasing the availability of alcohol would increase violence and DUIs.

According to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data for Alabama, Tuscaloosa and Madison counties had the third-highest number of DUI fatalities in 2009 with 14 in each county. Mobile County had the most with 31, followed by Jefferson County with 22. Information about which days of the weeks those crashes occurred wasn’t available.

David Brown, deputy director of the Center for Advanced Public Safety at the University of Alabama, was asked by The Tuscaloosa News to compare DUI crashes in cities that allow Sunday alcohol sales and cities that don’t.

Rather than using raw crash numbers, he looked at the proportion of DUI crashes that occurred between 2007 and 2010. Raw crash data would not account for population differences.

When comparing Mobile, which allows alcohol sales seven days a week, with Tuscaloosa, Brown found that Mobile has a relatively higher problem with alcohol-related crashes on Sundays and Mondays, while Tuscaloosa has a slightly higher problem on Fridays and Saturdays. In Mobile, 17.4 percent of crashes were alcohol-related on Sundays, more than the 15.7 percent in Tuscaloosa. Tuscaloosa had a higher percentage of alcohol-related crashes on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, compared with Mobile.

He also compared Auburn, Prattville, Huntsville and Mobile — all places where Sunday sales are legal — with data from Tuscaloosa, Gadsden and Athens, where it is not, and got similar results, said CAPS assistant research engineer Rhonda Stricklin. Brown did not have time to complete a major study, which is what it would take to pull out all of the ramifications and draw definitive conclusions, Stricklin said.

Nationwide data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration indicates that 33,808 people died in car crashes in 2009. Of those, 10,839 — about 32 percent — were alcohol-related. Other data indicate that alcohol sales might reduce church attendance: A paper

published in the Quarterly Journal of Economics found that there was a 15 percent decline in weekly church attendance and a 25 percent drop in donations in states where alcohol and blue laws were repealed, according to a U.S. News and World report article published in 2008.

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