

George McNaughtan

Professor Winget

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Alcohol Policy in Blanding, Utah

The city of Blanding, Utah, has a problem. There is a below-average local economy in the town, a lack of quality food options, limited job opportunities, and an excess of money leaving the town due to tourism revenue not staying in the town where it belongs. The solution to this problem, to an extent, would be to eliminate the long-standing rule in place which prohibits alcohol, the rule which is frequently voted on, frequently disputed over, and altogether is a subject of controversy in the small town. Although, after extensive research, the economic benefits would clearly exist, others could argue about the negative unintended consequences that abolishing this rule could impose upon the town. After gathering a group of ten sources, the themes that need to be addressed before any change could happen are clear, and they are as follows: community concern, public health and safety, regulation effectiveness, economic benefit, and examples of other towns making it work successfully. There is a lot of research that talks about alcohol policy and public health, but there are far fewer that demonstrate the effects of alcohol legalization in small rural tourist economies, like Blanding. Much of the available research is much more worried about national policy or regulations that talk about the entire state. That is the gap in knowledge; that is what still remains undetermined.

Although there have been benefits that the residents are aware of, at the end of the day, what people vote on is not as simple as determining what money could be brought to the town. Outside of money, as Laws points out in both the 2013 and 2017 articles about revisiting the vote for changing the law, many residents do not want to lose the values that they hold so dear (Laws, “Dry Run”; Laws, “Many Favor Keeping Ban”). The residents oppose it for both religious and fundamental things and values that they hold close to their heart. This feeling against alcohol is not without reason, as the CDC determined that there are many risks that come with alcohol, whether that be violence or drunk driving (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). There is a direct correlation with when a person is able to drink and how likely they are to crash, as demonstrated by Wagenaar and Toomey in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* (206-25). They have a very reliable account on this, as their data spans over a long period of time. They actually find that the higher that the minimum drinking age is, the more likely it is to lower alcohol-related crashes. Carpenter and Dobkin further the agenda of alcohol access having real effects on safety. The research shows a lot of things, specifically mortality rates that increase so fast after an individual turns twenty-one—the age at which they gain access to alcohol legally (Carpenter and Dobkin 164-82). It shows that there really is a danger at this point. It also shows that regulation is more important than just prohibition. It brings up questions that are really thought provoking, such as wondering how we can limit this problem. These sources together show that debates on the laws that control alcohol should balance out community concerns using evidence about regulation.

According to Laws, writing in the *San Juan Record*, the reason that residents want this law to change is so that money can grow in town (Laws, “Dry Run”). There are business

benefits, and according to Chilekasi, writing from CBS, residents in New Florence, Pennsylvania, actually did vote to overturn a similar law that had been in the town for a great deal of time (Chilekasi). The owners of local businesses expressed their excitement about getting the opportunity to sell beer, and clearly were happy about the idea, at least for the most part, considering the law had to be voted on by a referendum in order to change the law. According to an article written by WNY News Now, a small town, similar in size and values to Blanding, also overturned a law that had been in place since Prohibition (“Dry No More”). The referendum had different takes on the idea and they all passed, and that furthered the idea that these people really did want the town to be wet. Although they did have values, they eventually decided to change the long-standing law. However, not all sources show that the benefits of alcohol can be positive economically. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention contradicts the above sources because it communicates that alcohol can actually be an economic burden, rather than an advantage, simply because of the irresponsible choices that people make while under the influence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). It seems like uncontrolled access to alcohol is going to have a heavy toll on the society that it happens in.

Let us pretend that the referendum did pass, and Blanding is now legally allowed to sell and make alcohol within the city limits. What happens then? How are the laws enforced? These are the questions that many of the residents of Blanding are concerned about. As the San Juan Record shows, the residents want the ban to stay for that reason (Laws, “Many Favor Keeping Ban”). They are not sure if the change is safe. However, as previously demonstrated, having a high drinking age was proven to reduce the amount of crashes, at least as far as Wagenaar and Toomey have found (206-25). This idea challenges the idea that alcohol is safe, because for such

a study to exist it implies that in general there are more crashes with alcohol than without. The article does not necessarily vouch for alcohol's safety, but rather the fact that it can be improved to not be as dangerous as it could be. Somebody who is very concerned about the danger of alcohol and lives in Utah could benefit from looking at the Utah Department of Alcoholic Beverage Services, which really describes how alcohol is regulated in Utah (Utah Department of Alcoholic Beverage Services). At the end of the day, there are both pros and cons to having alcohol in the town, and this synthesis of ideas continues to demonstrate that agenda.

Alcohol is associated with health and safety risks, as anybody could guess. Although that is true, several studies suggest that regulation can actually reduce these harms. The CDC, for example, identifies alcohol as a contributor to violence, traffic fatalities, and long-term health conditions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). However, Wagenaar and Toomey point us in the direction that shows that good measures being put in place, such as high minimum drinking ages, reduce the amount of alcohol-related crashes that happen amongst young drivers (206-25). Carpenter and Dobkin even further demonstrate the idea that the most important thing is regulation, as mortality increases immediately after individuals gain access to alcohol when they turn twenty-one (164-82). These findings suggest that alcohol policy is a huge deal. This is a big deal to anybody who is voting, as they are just concerned about the well-being of everybody in their community, after all. The issue may not be alcohol itself, but rather how access is going to be controlled. This idea could further be explored and we could dive further into exactly what laws are effective other than just the age upon which you gain access to alcohol.

Blanding is not the only small community that has debated the idea of whether or not they will restrict alcohol or ban it altogether. Several towns across the United States have been in almost the exact same situation as Blanding, and yet still ultimately have decided to allow alcohol sales through local referendums, which are simply votes amongst the citizens. One example is the Associated Press report that residents of Argyle, New York, overturned a law that kept the town dry that had been in place since the Prohibition era, allowing stores, restaurants, and bars to begin selling alcohol for the first time in a very long time (“Dry No More”). In the same way, Adele Chilekasi talks about how voters in New Florence, Pennsylvania, approved a referendum that allowed alcohol sales, and 64% of residents supported the change (Chilekasi). The owners in New Florence were very excited about the change, and they expressed that selling beer along with food, specifically pizza, would attract more customers and help local businesses grow. These examples show that change is possible, for better or for worse. The people in the community might be concerned that there is nothing that they can do to change a law that has been around for so long. However, these examples show that change is possible—whether that change is good or bad. The voters simply have to care enough about the consequences in order for the change to be able to happen. When talking about Blanding’s own debate, there are these same questions of change. The community simply has to decide.

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