

Liquor bill tops legislative slate

By Ruth McGaw
Staff Writer

Just prior to press time, the Tar Heel received word that the North Carolina House of Representatives has voted down the local option liquor-by-the-drink legislation. The vote was 61 against and 56 for the proposal. During Wednesday afternoon's debate, three amendments were added to the liquor legislation. One would have doubled the state liquor tax with the proceeds going to alcohol rehabilitation programs while another would give the option of retaining brown-bagging.

The legislation was not tabled for the rest of the session, as is often the case. This procedure leaves open the possibility that the local option liquor-by-the-drink bill might again be voted on this year, although the chances of that happening appear to be slim.

Approval of the liquor-by-the-drink bill is once again headlining the short session of the North Carolina General Assembly.

The bill would allow counties and cities with ABC stores to vote on mixed drink sales. County commissioners or the city council would call the election, or 20% of the voters involved could call for the referendum. If passed by the county or city, permits could then be issued. Social establishments such as country clubs and Elks clubs that presently allow their members to keep liquor in private cabinets are eligible for liquor-by-the-drink licenses. Restaurants that seat at least thirty-six people are also eligible for the license.

There are two ABC systems presently in North Carolina, the county-owned and city-owned systems. 44 counties operate under the first system and approximately 80 cities and 44 more counties have the city system. Twelve North Carolina counties are "dry", or allow no liquor sales.

North Carolina has strong Southern Baptist roots and one of the major opponents of the bill is a church affiliated organization. These people fear what the easy availability of so much liquor might do to the state. The proponents of the mixed drink legislation are largely from urban areas such as Mecklenburg County.

All the pros and cons of the bill have been weighed in previous sessions and the bill has already passed the Senate. The bill was shelved

last summer when its sponsors feared they did not have the votes necessary to assure approval in the House. The bill now only needs to pass the House to gain the approval of the General Assembly.

A senator from the eastern part of the state explained why he voted against the bill by saying, "I'm afraid the Mafia might move in with liquor-by-the-drink." Representative Roberts Jernigan says he will vote against the bill because he has "always voted against whiskey legislation." He feels that sentiment of the people in his district (Northeastern) does not favor passage of the bill.

However, Representative Parks Helms, one of the leading advocates of the liquor-by-the-drink legislation, feels these fears are unfounded. The Charlotte lawmaker sees no connection of the bill with the Mafia or organized crime. Helms said that this view is a

"misrepresentation or a misunderstanding of the situation." Helms sees passage of the bill as very beneficial to North Carolina. He stated that approval of it would have a "significant effect on driving under the influence (DUI's) citations. He cited South Carolina as an example, with its 25 percent decrease in the issuing of DUI's since the enactment of its "mini-bottle" liquor law. Helms also said that the liquor-by-the-drink law would have a profound economic effect on North Carolina. Raleigh, Charlotte, and other metropolitan areas would benefit greatly through new construction and development resulting from increased tourist and convention trade and North Carolina beaches would also gain economically by approval of the bill.

Representative Helms sees "positive implications" for North Carolina if the bill is approved by the House. The vote, which should

be taken this week, is "still up in the air," said Helms. "It could go either way and we've got to do what we can until the bill is brought to the floor for the vote. He further explained that "there are enough uncommitted votes to swing the bill. It depends on who is taking the poll as to how the votes look now." The General Assembly grapevine indicates, however, that the bill will fail by a three to five vote margin.

Whether the Mafia and the Wrath of Hell will descend on the state is to be decided by the House of Representatives. On the other hand North Carolina restaurants and tourist industry might get a boost by passage of the highly controversial liquor-by-the-drink bill.

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