

# Buckeye social-host drinking law focuses on adult enabler

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by Jackee Coe

The Buckeye Town Council unanimously approved a social-host ordinance that will hold adult enablers of underage drinking legally responsible.

Depending on the severity of the offense, adults cited under the ordinance will face civil or criminal penalties that would include jail time and hefty fines. It will take effect within a couple of weeks.

Underage drinking is a "significant problem in our community," particularly in private homes where parents provide the alcohol, Police Chief Mark Mann said during a formal presentation to council members at Tuesday's council meeting. Eighty-two percent of Buckeye youths are consuming alcohol and about half of them get it from their home or other adults, he said.

"Many adults believe it's OK to serve alcohol to underage youths, including their own children, in the privacy of their own home," Mann said. "We're hoping that the social-host ordinance will educate the public and hold adults responsible for their actions that harm children."

Councilman Eric Orsborn called the ordinance "fantastic."

"I remember growing up and having friends whose parents would give them alcohol and the question was always, 'Well, what's the harm?' " he said. "This kind of puts an exclamation point on (the dangers)."

Vice Mayor Brian McAchran said he doesn't think the ordinance will "cure the problem, but I think that it's an additional tool that is very helpful that the police can use in trying to combat this."

Councilman Craig Heustis recalled several stories he has heard about violent crimes that were associated with parties where there was alcohol.

"I don't know how many of these actually related back to juveniles drinking or underage drinking but we don't need that in Buckeye, and I don't think any place needs it," he said. "So, I'm very much a supporter of this. I think it's a great thing to do."

Councilmen Robert Garza and Ray Strauss were not present at the council meeting.

The approval of the ordinance is the culmination of two years of work by the Way Out West Coalition, a grass-roots group of residents, community leaders and town officials working to reduce minors' access to alcohol and hold adult providers accountable.

Adults responsible for property where minors are drinking will be cited under the social-host ordinance. A "host presumption" provision states that adults who "knew or should have known" about the alcohol but didn't take appropriate steps to prevent it will be held accountable, even if they were not home at the time.

The first offense will be a civil violation. Offenders will have to pay a mandatory \$250 fine and complete a prevention education program.

The civil fine will increase to \$1,000 on the second offense and to \$1,500 on the third offense.

On the second and subsequent offenses, officers also will have the option to criminally cite an adult who is serving alcohol to a minor or knowingly permitting underage drinking or illegal drug use.

The criminal offense is a Class 1 misdemeanor and penalties can include a combination of community service, counseling, fine of up to \$2,500 and up to six months in jail.

Police say the civil and criminal options give officers flexibility to deal with each situation appropriately.

Coalition leaders hope the ordinance will increase awareness of the issue and change community behavior.

Ed Eddingfield, a coalition coordinator, said their research revealed that drinking, especially underage drinking, often leads to "destructive behaviors." He hopes the ordinance will help open up parents' eyes to the problem.

"It's about preventing underage drinking and all of the incredibly destructive behaviors that happen with it," Eddingfield said. "The behavior . . . is extremely scary and detrimental to the long-term health and welfare of our kids. And so what we're really hoping with the reduction to the access of alcohol (is that) some of that really bad behavior that went with it - under the supervision of some other adults in many cases - will also decrease and maybe even go away."

The educational component is key to increasing awareness of the issue and will "benefit the community as a whole," town prosecutor Manny Bustamante said. Adults could be ordered to take an alcohol prevention, life skills or parenting class.

"Our goal is to do it on a case-by-case (basis) to see what would assist the individual or the family the most," he said. "The whole goal of this mission and this program is to have families come out of this much more educated and much more informed so that the family as a whole makes these positive choices and we're able to reduce the number of minors that are consuming alcohol."

McAchrans, who is part of the coalition, said the ordinance was the "primary project" the group set out to accomplish, so Tuesday's vote was "a success."

He said two challenges remain for town and coalition leaders.

"The primary challenge is making sure that the community is educated that this law exists," McAchrans said. "The next challenge is to make sure that it is a right fit for the community, that it's the tool that we envisioned. . . . (Police) need to try it out . . . and make sure it has the reaction that we expect, that it curbs the (alcohol) abuse or the enabling of drinking by juveniles."

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2011/03/04/20110304buckeye-social-host-drinking-law.html#comments>