

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## LDS Church: Don't change Utah's liquor laws

*Alcohol • Days before the Legislature opens, an apostle says status quo ensures balance.*



By Robert Gehrke The Salt Lake Tribune

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The LDS Church made clear Tuesday its strong opposition to liberalizing Utah's liquor laws, including proposals to privatize alcohol sales, increase the number of liquor licenses or tear down the so-called "Zion Curtain."

The relatively rare public statement, which included a video featuring a top leader in the state's predominant faith, came days before the start of the 2014 legislative session and could carry tremendous weight among the overwhelmingly Mormon majority in the Legislature.



"We've got a reasonable system and it seems to be working. And I believe the

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Utah, Christofferson noted, has the lowest number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities, the lowest rate of binge drinking and ranks among the lowest states in DUI arrests.

"How could we suppose that changing our system to reflect that of [other states] is not going to yield the same results that they're seeing?" he asked. "We need to stay where we are because we've established something that has struck the right balance."

Christofferson also pushed back against media depictions of Utah's laws as being "quirky" or unusual, noting other states have unique and sometimes more restrictive liquor laws.

"People look at Utah and say, 'That's weird, that's a crazy system they have there.' They're really not recognizing that it's different everywhere," said Christofferson. "So what if we're fodder for a few jokes and ridicule on late-night TV? For me that's a very small price to pay for one less family that lost their wife and mother in a drunk driving accident or one less teenager who has become addicted to alcohol and all the poor decisions and problems that come from that." X

In a statement, the church specifically said it opposes privatizing Utah's state-run sale of liquor, increasing the number of liquor licenses available, selling wine or higher-alcohol-content beer in grocery stores, or doing away with the so-called Zion Curtain, a 7-foot-2-inch barrier designed to shield restaurant patrons, especially children, from seeing alcoholic drinks prepared or poured.

"The church also believes strongly that alcohol policy in Utah is closely tied to the moral climate of the state and legislation should not enable, promote or contribute to an 'alcohol culture,' " the statement said. "Nevertheless, the church does not contest the fact that alcohol is socially acceptable in our society and should be available to those who want it."

The church teaches its members to eschew alcohol.

In recent years, the Legislature made incremental steps toward liberalizing Utah's alcohol policy, largely to accommodate Utah's \$7.4 billion per year tourism industry.



It did away with a requirement that bars act as private clubs and patrons buy memberships, boosted the number of certain liquor licenses available and eased restrictions on how much alcohol can be in a cocktail.

Proposals this year looked at changing a requirement that restaurant patrons declare an "intent to dine" before ordering a drink, and doing away with the Zion Curtain.

Rep. Ryan Wilcox, R-Ogden, an LDS lawmaker who sponsored legislation to do away with Zion Curtain in the past and has floated the idea of privatizing parts of Utah's state-run retail liquor operation, said the church's message is similar to what it quietly conveyed to lawmakers at the Capitol in recent years. But having an apostle as the messenger is a departure.

"That part of it makes me a little uncomfortable," said Wilcox. "If you claim it's not doctrine and yet have an apostle get up and give the message ... that's just short of [LDS] President [Thomas] Monson getting up and saying Utah's liquor laws come from God. I mean, holy cow!"

Wilcox said he didn't plan to spend a huge amount of time on his Zion Curtain bill, anyway, since the makeup of the Senate, which defeated his effort last year, hasn't changed.

Thad Hall, a political science professor at the University of Utah, said the conflict in Utah's alcohol laws has always been the tension between religious ideology and economic concerns related to tourism.



"Basically this will likely mean there isn't a lot of stuff that happens," Hall said.

"The flip-side is that anybody who was going to have an idea to make liquor laws more restrictive also may be hindered by this. So I think this means we're in for a nice, happy, status-quo session on alcohol."

That's fine with Sen. John Valentine, R-Orem, who, more than any other lawmaker, has shaped alcohol policy in recent years. He said the church's statement lines up with his own belief that the state's current system is working.

"Hooray!" Valentine said. "Candidly, we've got a fairly good balance now. ... It's going to become one of those quiet issues this session. If I had my druthers, I'd like to step back and take a breath and see how things are going with alcohol policy."

The LDS Church has long had a powerful voice on alcohol policy in Utah. It worked to defeat "liquor by the drink" initiatives in the past and had a key role in Utah clubs doing away with mini-bottles in the 1980s.

Scott Beck, CEO of Visit Salt Lake, said he agrees with the church that Utah's quality of life should be celebrated.

"But we're not asking for a loosening of liquor laws," he said. "We're asking for a normalization. A one-size-fits-all no longer works in Utah."

The "intent to dine" requirement, for example, is confusing to patrons and Utah is the only state with such an edict, he said. It's one area where the laws could be normalized.

Melva Sine, president of the Utah Restaurant Association, said her group respects the church's view, but "the majority of Utahns really feel like some of our liquor laws need to be updated and improved, especially on how we come across as being hospitable."



She said getting rid of the Zion Curtain wouldn't change consumption in the state, but would enhance Utah's image.

"We need to treat our customers in a hospitable way and treat adults as adults want to be treated," Sine said. "They have the right and responsibility to weigh in as we all do, and all views need to be considered when we address issues that impact the state of Utah."

Ken Bullock, executive director of the Utah League of Cities and Towns, acknowledges the rarity of the church taking such a public stand on a policy issue and says it's fine for the church to say the current laws are working, but "you have to ask who it's working for?"

"If it's working for the LDS Church, then, yes, obviously they feel that way, but the communities feel differently," said Bullock. Cities and towns are looking for changes to the Zion Curtain, he said, and see no purpose to hiding drink preparation at restaurants behind a wall.

More could be done on the enforcement and education end to keep liquor out of the hands of minors, he said, but policy discussions on other issues still need to take place.

Steve Barth, a former legislator and current lobbyist for hospitality interests, said the state should be proud that it's doing a good job in minimizing the negative impacts of alcohol. ✕

"But there are things that rise up and need to be fixed because it's good public policy for both sides," he said. "It's a long session and there will be lots of talks."

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Reporter Kathy Stephenson contributed to this story. —

### More on the Web

To read the LDS Church's statement on Utah's alcohol laws and view a video of apostle D. Todd Christofferson discussing those rules, go to <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/alcohol-laws-utah>.



