

A toast to the tax on alcohol

By [Renée Loth](#)

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Text size

THE MASSACHUSETTS sales tax on alcohol is less than a year old, but already liquor retailers and distributors want to strangle it in its crib. A proposed ballot question to repeal the 6.25 percent tax on liquor — or to restore liquor’s historic exemption from the tax, depending on how you look at it — would make the state poorer, and not just in terms of tax revenues.

On the surface, the tax repeal seems an easy win. Package store owners argue that they already pay excise taxes on liquor, and that even 62 cents on a \$10 bottle of wine puts them at a competitive disadvantage with New Hampshire, which has no sales tax. Plus, the tax hits a politically popular demographic: quite literally, Joe Six-pack. Voters are angry. Lashing out against taxes is predictable, even understandable.

But then, there are the facts. Massachusetts’ state excise taxes on beer, wine, and distilled spirits are all below the national median, and only five states don’t apply a sales tax to liquor. It’s hard to see why alcohol should get the same kind of exemption from the state sales tax that necessities like food and clothing receive. Or why drinks purchased in a package store should not be taxed when the same drinks purchased in a bar or restaurant are.

And then there is Andy Porell. He is a senior at the William J. Ostiguy High School in Boston, one of three “recovery high schools” in the state that receive funds from the alcohol tax. He spoke at a State House rally this week about the program that saved his life. “If you’re a kid like I was, 15, 16, a mess all over the place, who wants help and there is no help,” he said, “that to me is just dumb.”

To be accepted at a recovery high school, students must be drug-free and sober for 30 days and committed to staying that way. They submit to random drug tests every week, including during summer vacation, and run their own AA meetings. Otherwise, Ostiguy is a traditional public school; the 44 students take the MCAS and meet all the regular graduation requirements.

“These are not kids who dabble with drugs or alcohol,” said school principal Roger Oser. “They come to us after they have hit some pretty hard bottoms.” The students are referred to the school from the courts, the Department of Youth Services, detox centers, or desperate, heartbroken families.

The school is one of hundreds of substance abuse counseling, educational, and treatment programs supported by the \$93 million the alcohol tax has brought in this fiscal year. A jail diversion program in Plymouth, for example, opens in July, with 60 beds dedicated to longer (90-day) treatment for heroin and OxyContin. “This epidemic is so prevalent,” said Senator Steven Tolman. “It’s in Dover, it’s in Danvers, it’s in Peabody, and it’s ruining lives.”

Not softhearted about addicts? Try hardheaded fiscal reality. Drug and alcohol treatment saves taxpayers untold millions in prison sentences, emergency room visits, chronic health problems, violence, and crime.

Still, politics and logic don’t always go hand in hand. Both of the self-proclaimed fiscal conservatives in the governor’s race, Republican Charlie Baker and independent Tim Cahill, support repeal of the tax. Cahill’s position is especially awkward, since as state treasurer he benefits from a percentage of the tax that helps fund the Massachusetts School Building Authority, which he controls. Cahill has been traveling the state this year handing out checks to communities for school projects. Spreading government largesse is a perk of incumbency, but Cahill’s opposition to a revenue source he exploits seems . . . inconsistent.

Both the House and Senate versions of next year’s budget contain language dedicating all the alcohol tax revenue to substance abuse prevention and treatment. The Senate version seems to make an exception for the school building authority.

Andy Porell doesn’t follow politics. He only knows what works. “I’m doing really good now,” he said. He’ll be going to college in the fall.

That’s a public investment worth toasting.

Renée Loth’s column appears regularly in the Globe. ■

