

BREAKING NEWS Marin placed on state COVID-19 watch list; 2 more deaths at San Quentin July 3, 2020 at 7:31 pm



OPINION

Marin Voice: Relaxing rules on alcohol consumption during the pandemic is harmful



People dine at restaurants on Fourth Street in San Rafael, Calif. on June 25, 2020. (Douglas Zimmerman/Special to the Marin Independent Journal)

By [Michael Scippa](#) |

PUBLISHED: July 3, 2020

Under the dubious guise of “regulatory relief,” long-standing, evidence-based California alcohol policies critical to public health and safety have been rolled back during the COVID-19 crisis.

Nowhere is that more evident now than Marin County. Proposals for shutting down Fourth Street in San Rafael, Main Street in Tiburon and a public parking lot in Fairfax for public alcohol consumption are done deals. Cities in Marin could soon end up looking like seedy, inebriated Bourbon Street in New Orleans, under the guise of reviving patronage for a few struggling licensees.

As cities and the state slow reopening plans due to a surge in coronavirus cases and hospitalizations, moving forward with the normalization of alcohol consumption in large public spaces is not in the best

interests of public health and safety. This is especially true as it relates to our impressionable young people — especially since research shows that alcohol consumption weakens the immune system, making it more vulnerable to COVID-19 infection.

How did we get here? Over the past four months the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control has been rolling back alcohol regulations with a deaf ear to public health and harm-prevention voices. This disturbing, industry-propelled push for deregulation has led to expanded on-sale footprints, mixed cocktails to go, ubiquitous home delivery with ineffective age verification and ridiculous “virtual tastings.”

In San Rafael, Tiburon and Fairfax, ill-advised plans to roll back public alcohol consumption regulations are finding traction with sales-tax starved local city councils. However, these actions, illegal up to now, are being allowed by the ABC under the influence of an industry-led call for “economic relief.”

In doing so the ABC is turning its back on ensuring public health and safety by encouraging moderation and self-control in alcohol consumption. Our cities are making a mistake to blindly follow.

Marin County has a well-documented problem with alcohol. It suffers from the state’s highest rates of binge drinking across all age groups. Outdoor drinking in public spaces should not be normalized, it multiplies the pre-COVID-19 alcohol consumption problems that Marin and California already have.

Excessive alcohol use is No. 3 on the list of preventable causes of death in California. The state suffers over 10,500 alcohol-related deaths, 165,000 alcohol-related hospitalizations and \$35 billion in related economic harm.

At Alcohol Justice we see how bars and alcohol producers care only about profits while giving lip service to harm prevention through feckless “Drink Responsibly” campaigns. With the ABC rollbacks, there is fear permeating the prevention community that Big Alcohol will pressure ABC and the legislature to make those changes permanent.

Many other states are trying to institutionalize outdoor drinking and Ohio would like to expand its bar times to 4 a.m. Also, still alive in the California legislature, is SB 58, Sen. Scott Wiener’s third attempt to extend bar hours.

State deregulation for the sake of corporate profits, under a cloak of phony emergency management, erodes our first line of public-health defense. A festival atmosphere is not the solution for the economic viability of bars and restaurants.

We challenge the state ABC to rethink the terrible policy decisions it has been making during COVID-19 and instead defend the rights of residents. In Marin, in particular, we maintain that a select few economic interests should not gain marginally more profits from public space, open-air dining and drinking, while residents and taxpayers and our impressionable youth suffer the consequences.

It’s time for the voices of public health and safety to be heard. The California ABC must apply the brakes on Big Alcohol’s incessant push for opportunistic deregulation, what Naomi Klein has called “crises capitalism.”

In the long run, the negative health outcomes and costs of expanding alcohol availability will far surpass any social or economic benefits in Marin and California. It’s time for Marin city leaders, the state ABC and alcohol policymakers in all states to honor obligations to protect health and safety and do what is right for the people, rather than for an industry whose products cause so much pain, suffering and death.

Michael J. Scippa, of Tiburon, is the public affairs director at Alcohol Justice.