



Proponents argue ending Vermont ‘happy hour’ ban could be business boon

By [Jon Street](#)

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BURLINGTON, Vt. — Vermont officials argue ending a happy hour ban would carry with it a cost to society, but business owners, residents and scholars say that allowing discounted drinks could be a boon to business.

As part of its efforts to curb “rapid and excessive” alcohol consumption, the **Vermont Department of Liquor Control** forbids licensees from selling alcoholic beverages at reduced prices during certain hours.

Bill Goggins, director of enforcement at the Department of Liquor Control, told **Vermont Watchdog**, “It is the government’s role to make sure our communities are safe.”

“Alcohol takes many lives every year in this country,” he said. “Without government regulation, the cost to society would be huge — people missing work, cleaning up car accidents and other things that take up both time and resources.

Burlington business owners don’t necessarily agree with that view.

“I understand and appreciate the (Department of Liquor Control’s) concern that (happy hour) encourages binge drinking. However I’d like to believe that bar and restaurant staffs, not just mine, are trained and experienced enough to maintain a responsible and safe atmosphere during an allotted happy hour,” said **Ronnie Ryan**, owner of **Ake’s Place** in downtown **Burlington**.

He noted that liquor-selling establishments must take biannual training courses to keep them updated on laws and practices to ensure their patrons stay safe.

Champlain College junior **Will Mercer** said happy hour would “help business” and that deciding how much alcohol to serve should be the judgment of bartenders — not the government.

Ryan agrees. “Burlington is so rich in young professionals and college students I’m confident it would help business, and if it helps our business it also helps the state as it will generate more money in taxes,” he said.

Walter Olson, a senior fellow for constitutional studies at **The Cato Institute**, a libertarian-leaning, **Washington, D.C.**-based think tank, told Vermont Watchdog, “Why should Vermont insert itself between deals that please restaurants and customers alike?”

“When young people are starting out in the job world, they like moving to the sorts of places where there’s happy hour... It’s good for main streets that don’t want to go dead when the work day ends, good for restaurants trying to reach new customers, and good for tourism. The toll of drunk driving across **America** has plunged tremendously, both in states that have bans and in those that don’t, and it’s hard to see any difference there,” Olson said.

Indeed, alcohol-related deaths in Vermont have declined in recent years. So too, have the number of alcohol-related deaths nationally (which also takes into account states that have not banned happy hour).

In 2000, the **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration** reported 16,653 alcohol-related deaths nationwide, 31 of which occurred in Vermont. In 2005, the number of alcohol-related deaths across the country increased to 16,885. Of those alcohol-related deaths in 2005, 29 of them occurred in Vermont.

In 2011, the most recent year for which complete data have been made available, the number of alcohol-related deaths across the country fell to 11,510, with 23 of those occurring in Vermont.

Overall, that’s a 30 percent decrease in alcohol-related deaths nationwide from 2000 to 2011. In Vermont, that’s a decrease of 25 percent from 2000-2011.

Yet Goggins maintains the state’s happy hour laws are “backed up by science” because “we know how alcohol affects people.”

Ryan told Vermont Watchdog having a happy hour every day might be “a little overkill.”

“My suggestion would be to allow it for a small time frame, maybe two or three hours on Fridays when every one’s work week/school week has ended and people are looking to unwind,” he said.

Ryan added that perhaps a limit on discounts would be appropriate.

“For example, prices can’t be any lower than a dollar or two of their normal prices. In addition if they found it to be a problem and bars/restaurants weren’t keeping a safe atmosphere they could always outlaw it again,” he said.