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Bid to allow stronger beer on tap to pass this session

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Here's a bit of cheery news for folks who plan to hit the pubs tonight: A dedicated group of Iowans appears to be winning the fight for "beer equality."

The discrimination, they say, centers on longtime Iowa laws that prohibit breweries in the state from making and selling beer that has more than 5 percent alcohol content.

Out-of-state breweries have sold higher-alcohol beer to Iowans for years.

"As far as we're concerned, it is a matter of equality," said Dave Coy, president of the Iowa Brewers Guild and brewmaster for Raccoon River Brewery in Des Moines.

Iowa's 20 or so breweries could produce beer with up to 12 percent alcohol content under a section of Senate File 2088, a government reorganization bill that could receive final approval from the Senate by Monday.

"It's a big deal," said Jeff "Puff" Irvin, head brewer at Olde Main Brewing Co. in Ames. "There are some styles out there that we really can't make.

"It's kind of fun and exciting that we could make those styles."

State records show that people in Iowa consumed 37.6 gallons of beer per legal drinker in the past fiscal year, which ended June 30. Beer sales were up 1.4 percent, allowing the state to collect \$14.6 million in taxes from the world's oldest and most widely consumed alcohol.

Iowa ranked 15th among states in consumption of malt beverages per legal drinker as of 2008, according to the Beer Institute.

It's likely the proposal won't bring any added revenue to the state.

All higher-alcohol beer now must go through the Iowa Alcoholic Beverages Division distribution process, just as liquor does. Under the proposal, out-of-state distributors could ship higher-alcohol beer directly to consumers, which means the state would collect less distribution revenue. But the state likely would make up the differences in sales taxes, division officials said.

Not everyone is toasting the proposal.

Rep. Mark Smith, D-Marshaltown, introduced an amendment to the bill that would have eliminated any hope of increasing the amount of alcohol in beer. That provision died on a technicality and was not voted

upon by the House.

Smith is concerned that the change could lead to more substance abuse and drunken driving.

"When you increase the availability of alcohol or any other drug, you increase the social problems that are associated with use," Smith said. "While we have major concerns with other drugs, consistently, the drug that has been most related to crime has been alcohol."

Smith raised his concerns on the House floor to Rep. Vicki Lensing, D-Iowa City, who led debate on the beer portion of the bill. Lensing noted that other types of stronger alcoholic beverages are already widely available in Iowa.

She believes the change in the law is about fairness.

"It kind of levels the playing field," Lensing said. "This allows microbrewers and brew pubs to make it and sell it here."

Bill Shackelford, a Des Moines resident and a past president of a local Mothers Against Drunk Driving chapter, said his concern is that people might not realize how much they've had to drink if they are accustomed to lighter beers.

Shackelford would like Iowa to enact laws that require consumers to be informed of alcohol content in beverages.

Federal law already requires that alcohol content be listed on bottles or containers. However, customers in establishments that serve beers from the tap might not have as ready access to the information, Shackelford said.

"It's probably inevitable, but the key is to sufficiently notify the public," Shackelford said.

Coy, president of the Iowa Brewers Guild, noted that higher-alcohol beer is already on the market. The only difference is that, under the proposed law change, Iowa brewers would no longer be excluded.

He said higher-alcohol beers are viewed as specialized, and he believes drinkers are more likely to treat them like other quality drinks.

"These are beers that are not meant to be slammed," Coy said. "It's like enjoying a fine wine. It's something that's helping to elevate beer to something like wine, something that's meant to be savored."
