

Statehouse Briefs

The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: [Feb 21, 1997](#). pg. A.20
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A NOD TO DRAM-SHOP BILL

It appears as if Utah taverns and private clubs soon will have to boost their liability-insurance coverage.

The House on Wednesday approved 54-11 an amendment to the state's so-called dram-shop law, which increases the amount of damages drunken-driving victims can recover from establishments that serve inebriated customers. Currently, the law caps liability at \$100,000 per person injured or killed and \$300,000 per crash.

Senate Bill 112, which already has passed the Senate, raises that cap to \$500,000 and \$1 million, respectively.

-- Dan HarrieBILLBOARD BILL PASSES

The Utah Senate has passed a bill that would require government agencies to work with sign companies as billboards are moved during highway construction.

It was estimated that it could cost local governments up to \$100,000 per sign to move.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Al Mansell, R-Midvale, would set standards for maintaining the landscape surrounding billboards.

The bill also ensures that if a billboard must be moved because of highway rebuilding, government agencies involved must work with sign companies to find another site, and, if all else fails, compensate the companies for any losses.

The Senate passed the bill 27-1 on Wednesday and now it goes to the House.

-- The Associated PressDEBATE OVER DIVORCE

A bill to make it harder to get a divorce drew heated debate in the Utah Senate, which advanced the measure over objections that it could force some couples to stay in harmful relationships.

Sponsored by Sen. Craig Taylor, R-Kaysville, the bill would revoke no-fault divorces for couples with children. Irreconcilable differences still would be grounds for divorce -- but only if both spouses agree.

“We live in a society where we have taken fault out of many things,” Taylor said. “We have no-fault insurance and no-fault divorce, and with that ‘no-fault’ label we have discouraged responsibility.”

But several Democratic senators voiced concern. Sen. Pete Suazo, R-Salt Lake, for instance, said he has received letters from women who described abusive marriages and simply wanted out.

“I don’t think through law we can force people to stay together who don’t want to stay together,” Suazo said.

The measure advanced, 18-10, and likely will come up for final passage in the Senate today.

-- The Associated Press
SENATORS WANT 25(CT) SMOKE HIKE

Senators Thursday approved a quarter-per-pack cigarette-tax hike.

Like the House, which last week nodded to a 20-cent hike, the Senate fought back attempts to earmark the new revenue for certain programs. The lawmakers estimate the increase will generate roughly \$20 million a year in new revenues for the state.

“We need to send a strong message,” said Sen. Scott Howell, adding the tax increase would do too little to stop smoking.

GOP Sen. Robert Montgomery, a retired heart surgeon from North Ogden, insisted earmarking would make House lawmakers spike the bill altogether, while the higher tax rate already would pose one obstacle to its final passage. He argued the 25-cent hike would help convince many smokers to quit and persuade other people not to take up the habit.

If the 25-cent increase is passed, Utah’s cigarette tax would be 51.5 cents per pack.

The bill awaits final passage in the Senate. GOP Sens. Alarik Myrin of Altamont and Howard Stephenson of Draper opposed the increase.

-- Judy Fahys
LIMITING RENTAL INSPECTIONS

A bill that would restrict the inspections cities require for rental units got a rocky ride in the Utah Senate, which first killed the bill, resurrected and finally passed it.

The measure, sponsored by Sen. David Buhler, R-Salt Lake, would limit the inspections to once every three years unless the city has reasonable cause to believe there’s a problem with an apartment and another inspection is needed.

It also would exempt inspections for single units and duplexes. Originally, Buhler wanted to exclude complexes of four apartments or less.

The amended bill passed the body, 20-9 on Wednesday.

-- The Associated Press MORALITY BILLS PUT ON HOLD

Three bills dealing with illegal sexual activity have been killed so the Utah Sentencing Commission can study them this summer.

Rep. David Ure, R-Kamas, Rep. Lowell Nelson, R-Highland, and Sen. Craig Taylor, R-Kaysville, will hold their bills so the commission can study consensual intercourse and sodomy, defined as anal and oral sex.

Under current law, 14-year-olds can consent to sodomy but adolescents must be 16 to consent to sexual intercourse. House Bill 256, sponsored by Lowell, would raise the age for consensual intercourse to 18. Consensual sodomy with an underage person is a class B misdemeanor while intercourse is a third-degree felony.

Ure's House Bill 134 would equalize the punishment between sodomy and intercourse, making sodomy a felony. As with the intercourse law, if the sodomy "victim" is 16 and the other partner is no older than 19, the crime is a class B misdemeanor.

Taylor's bill also discusses sex between minors.