

## Alcohol Tax Repeal – A Tale of Two Polls

By Kyle Cheney/Statehouse News Service

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BOSTON —

Countering earlier evidence that Massachusetts residents are leaning toward repealing a sales tax on alcohol, advocates against a likely ballot question on the tax released results of a poll Tuesday showing a majority of state residents in support of the tax, which funds substance abuse treatment programs.

The poll of 450 “likely voters,” released as hundreds of alcohol tax supporters packed the State House’s Grand Staircase before fanning out to lobby lawmakers, was conducted from May 3 to May 5 and carried a 4.5 percent margin of error.

The tax, implemented by lawmakers and the governor last year, is expected to raise about \$110 million in the fiscal year beginning July 1. It removed a longstanding sales tax exemption on alcohol sales at the same time lawmakers approved, and Gov. Deval Patrick signed a 25 percent sales tax increase.

The poll, conducted by Anderson Opinion Research of Boston, asked voters, “If the election were held today, would you vote yes or no on a ballot question to remove the state sales tax on alcoholic beverages?” Fifty-eight percent of respondents said they would vote “no” and 36 percent said they would vote “yes” with 6 percent undecided.

The poll results also showed that a majority of respondents support a separate ballot question to lower the state sales tax from 6.25 percent to 3 percent. That finding buoyed supporters of the alcohol tax, who said it showed voters were distinguishing between the two proposals, not simply voting on an anti-tax line.

The results run counter to a Suffolk University/7News poll released late last month, which asked 500 registered voters between May 20 and May 23, “Would you support or oppose the elimination of the added sales tax on alcohol?” The results: 48 percent support the elimination, 43 percent oppose elimination and 9 percent are undecided. That poll carried a 4 percent margin of error.

Chris Anderson, the pollster for the anti-repeal advocates, said the difference in poll results was likely due to the wording of the question.

“I just think that when voters go into the ballot box, they’re going to be confronted with something closer to what we asked,” he said.

Supporters of repeal, including a coalition of package stores, have argued that Massachusetts residents unwilling to pay the tax on alcohol will travel to New Hampshire, which has no sales

tax. They have also argued that the tax hurts local businesses and taxes residents who are already struggling to make ends meet amid a struggling economy.

At the State House rally, a red-faced Sen. Steven Tolman raised his voice to deride the “B.S.” he said is coming from repeal proponents, who often argue that Massachusetts residents travel to New Hampshire to purchase their alcohol.

Tolman said the average “American youngster” sees 100,000 alcohol commercials before turning 18.

“The average drinking age is getting younger,” he said.

“The number one tool used to decrease underage drinking is to raise the price, raise the tax,” said Robert Monahan, president of Recovery Homes Collaborative.

The poll, conducted by the Campaign for Addiction Prevention, Treatment and Recovery, also found that Democrats support the alcohol tax by a 72 to 21 margin, and Republicans are split on whether to repeal it.

Hundreds of supporters of the tax packed in at the foot of the Grand Staircase, some donning stickers that read “tax alcohol, support treatment.”

Backers lauded lawmakers for dedicating alcohol tax revenues in next fiscal year’s budget to substance abuse and treatment programs.

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