

Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™ Column

Alcohol at Community Events: Keeping Youth Safe

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Hillsborough is a happenin' place! Businesses are thriving and we have been named one of the coolest small towns in America. We are blessed with moderate weather to enjoy our beautiful surroundings and outdoor events. Community events in Hillsborough have grown more numerous over the years, and with that growth come change. One change pertaining to the permitting of alcohol sales at public events is currently being considered by our local governments and could impact our children. Most of the events held in Hillsborough are actually on county property, which complicates matters, making it not just a town permitting decision, but one that involves Orange County as well. Our local law enforcement agencies are working with the Hillsborough Town staff and Orange County staff to resolve how best to handle requests by event organizers and vendors to sell alcohol at such community events as Hog Day, Sunday concert series, events at River park and others.

Alcohol remains the number one most frequently used substance among youth. A 2015 report by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) showed that those who do drink underage are heavier consumers than adults; drinking an average of 3.2 drinks per day in comparison to consumers of legal age who drink 1.5 drinks per day. According to PIRE, annual sales of alcohol *consumed by youth* in North Carolina averaged \$982 per underage customer. THAT is a lot of alcohol! Youth who begin consuming before age 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol dependency later in life. Adolescents usually obtain alcohol—either directly or indirectly—from adults. Efforts to reduce underage drinking, therefore, need to focus on adults and must engage the society at large. Part of the discussion is how to allow adults who desire to drink alcohol to do so while maintaining a safe environment for our youth. Many communities where similar events are held employ various “best practices,” including a designated area for consumption (i.e. a “beer garden”) marked off by fencing, wristbands for those who are over 21, the use of clear cups (usually 12oz), and monitors inside the designated area to ensure that anyone underage is not accessing alcohol.

Another important consideration is that as alcohol use becomes more widespread and visible throughout the community, these “norms” begin to affect our children, who are receiving a subtle message about the role that alcohol plays in social and recreational activities. According to the National Academy of Sciences, “Youth drink within the context of a society in which alcohol is normative behavior and images about alcohol are pervasive.” Ensuring that the presence of alcohol does not become too prevalent at these types of events will help develop a healthier set of social norms for the youth of our community. For this reason, it is recommended that beer gardens be separated from children’s activities.

As our community representatives and employees work to balance the presence and availability of alcohol with safeguards for the health and well-being of our youth, we must look to best practices for *Hillsborough* when it comes to alcohol sales at community events.