

Beer for Thought  
by Jeremy Arney

A little over two months ago the Tribune editorial board wrote an Op-Ed piece entitled, “Our View: Raise the beer tax; it’s the right thing to do.” The article advocated Rep. Terese Berceau’s, D-Madison, valid point that Wisconsin has a drinking problem and the idea of raising the beer tax by roughly 15 cents a six-pack—to help pay for the social costs of alcohol abuse—should be a no-brainer. Our coalition stands firmly behind the Tribune’s editorial board’s stance concerning the beer tax. I would also like to explain our coalition’s position on the beer tax (Assembly Bill 287). When it comes to binge-drinking and Wisconsin’s public health, we are not supporting a return to prohibition. Instead, we are more interested in adopting a harm reduction approach to public health issues like binge-drinking.

Harm reduction policies are types of public health reforms aimed to reduce the costs of healthcare and legal services. By raising the taxes on a six-pack from 3.6 cents to 18 cents, the expected \$40 million gained in revenue will help contribute to alcohol and drug abuse treatment and prevention programs. In addition, the increase in funds will allow law officers across the state to better enforce tough new drinking and driving laws. Changing Wisconsin’s infamous distinction of consistently leading the nation in overall binge-drinking, binge-drinking amongst its college students, and alcohol-related traffic fatalities is a long and formidable road. Nevertheless, as concerned citizens we have to start somewhere. I saw a bumper sticker the other day that summarizes our coalition’s approach quite succinctly, “Harm none, do as ye will.” An increase in the beer tax is one type of harm reduction policy to assist in alleviating some of the public health costs brought on by the heavy drinking culture in Wisconsin.

Across the nation, public health reform remains a hot topic. Certain policies, like an increase in the beer tax, can help initiate health reforms at both state and local levels of

government. In a July 8, 2009 Tribune article, La Crosse County Human Services Director Gerald Huber reminded us that “counties have a lot at stake in what happens to health care reform.” Furthermore, in the same article, “La Crosse County taxpayers wind up subsidizing health care costs”, including those derived from alcohol and substance abuse. A rather trivial increase in the Wisconsin beer tax can help reduce some of these health care burdens placed on local area taxpayers. An additional health benefit gained by increasing the beer tax is an overall reduction of drinking altogether. According to a study released earlier this year by the Harvard School of Public Health, as prices go up, people become less likely to drink—and when they do drink, they drink less. These findings were true for teenagers as well as adults.

Please don’t get me wrong, I’ve got nothing against beer. And, generally, I’m not “chomping at the bit” to have my taxes increased. However, the existing tax burdens of alcohol-related harms within the state and local area does not fall solely on the small percentage of the heaviest drinkers, but on all types of drinkers (those who drink moderately, low level drinkers and non-drinkers too). This is analogous to all citizens subsidizing the ill effects of second-hand smoke, regardless of whether they smoke or not. To address these public health issues, Wisconsin citizens have voted to increase taxes on cigarettes and tobacco eight times over the last thirty years. On the other hand, it has been forty years since Wisconsin has had a single increase in state beer taxes. In fact, in order to produce the same state excise tax gained through the sale of one carton of cigarettes in Wisconsin during the fiscal year of 2008, a whopping 524 six-packs would have had to have been sold ( check it out at [www.rjrt.com/legal/taxBeerWine.asp](http://www.rjrt.com/legal/taxBeerWine.asp)). Now that’s some beer for thought.

*Four paragraphs: 645 words.*