

## Should cocktails to-go continue post pandemic?

Written by Sydnie Holzfaster

OMAHA, Neb. (FOX 42 KPTM) — Are cocktails to-go here to stay? An executive order from Governor Pete Ricketts has allowed bars and restaurants to sell carry-out cocktails for the last seven months. Now two state senators are backing a new study to determine if the executive order should be made permanent.

“The coronavirus pandemic has had a devastating impact on people. It’s had a devastating impact on people’s health and well being. It’s also had a devastating impact on jobs and small businesses,” State Senator Tony Vargas said. “We should constantly be making sure we are protecting the public and improving our healthcare. We can also look to avenues to make sure we are reacting to the way small businesses are being affected by this pandemic. This is one way we can learn more and figure out what strikes that balance.”

Resolution 450 calls for an interim study to determine whether the law should be amended to make the temporary waiver of Nebraska’s Liquor Control Act, permanent.

Vargas represents downtown and south Omaha, an area home to many small businesses including bars and restaurants. The resolution also has backing from State Senator Anna Wishart, who represents downtown Lincoln.

“We’ve seen other states that have made this, either executive order or temporary change, a permanent law change to provide a new, innovative revenue stream for some bars that also makes sure we inherently create safety for the public,” Vargas said.

The current executive order does not include a sunset date. The order allows for bars and restaurants to sell carry-out options for alcoholic drinks up to 64 ounces, as long as the beverage is sealed.

Megan Malone, owner of Tiny House in Little Bohemia, said the option to sell cocktails to-go has been a lifeline for her business during the COVID-19 outbreak.

“I would say in any given week, the to-go cocktails could be 40 to 60 percent of our revenue,” Malone said. “There’s plenty of people who are being very COVID conscious and staying home, which I think is great given the rising cases in Nebraska.”

Malone said her business was only closed a day before the governor’s executive order allowed her staff to convert windows on the south side of Tiny House into a cocktail drive-thru.

“To try to do half as many people with twice as many safety measures, it really cuts into your profits. Being able to do things like to-go and the drive-thru are really essential for getting something anywhere approaching normal sales, which has never happened,” Malone said.

Chris Wagner, Executive Director of Project Extra Mile, said he feels the executive order was put in place with good intentions, but has led to more harm than good.

“Those executive orders increase alcohol availability. There is a ton of scientific research out there that shows that when you increase availability you are going to have more consumption and

more excessive consumption,” Wagner said. “We’ve seen some preliminary data that shows that binge drinking has increased by 26 percent [across the nation] during the pandemic. That’s troubling, because alcohol actually reduces your immune system’s effectiveness, so it actually makes you more susceptible to the virus.”

Wagner said by making alcohol more accessible through drive-thru or carry-out options, state leaders could be putting people’s wellbeing at risk.

“We are actually one of the worst states in the nation when it comes to binge drinking. Over 21 percent of our population reports binge drinking at least once in the last month, which is fifth worse in the country,” Wagner said.

Malone said the to-go options have helped her and other businesses throughout the city stay afloat during the pandemic.

“I think Nebraskans are responsible enough to handle to-go cocktails. I think if you ask bars and restaurants, those sales will represent the enthusiasm of the customers,” Malone said. “I don’t see any reason to take it away.”

Vargas says next month the state will launch an interim study to determine how loosening restrictions on alcohol have affected small businesses, public safety and to help determine if carry-out alcoholic beverages should become a permanent option for businesses in Nebraska.

In July, the Iowa legislature passed a law allowing cocktails to-go to become permanent after Governor Kim Reynolds eased alcohol regulations due to the pandemic.

Earlier this month Ohio Governor Mike DeWine signed a bill allowing businesses to continue selling alcohol to-go after the pandemic is over.