

## Regents vote opens the door to possible alcohol sales at NU athletic events

Written by Dan Crisler

The University of Nebraska Board of Regents approved a policy Friday that opens the door to the possibility that alcohol could someday be served at Husker athletic events.

With the 7-0 vote, the regents took a major step toward reversing a decades-long ban on the sale of alcohol during Husker athletic events. However, the new policy does not make that a certainty.

Instead, the policy gives the chancellor of each university along with the system president the option to consider whether to allow alcohol to be sold during home athletic events. The proposal was sponsored by University of Nebraska-Lincoln Athletic Director Trev Alberts and Chancellor Ronnie Green and is a revision of a policy last updated in 1999.

"This is very much a crawl-walk (process). We're talking years here," NU President Ted Carter told reporters.

Though the policy approved Friday would allow Carter to sign off on alcohol sales and advertisements at athletic events, he said he would bring any specific proposals before the regents for discussion. That applies to any of the universities in the NU system, not just UNL.

Before the vote, Carter said opening up any university events for alcohol would be a decision only after considering "all parts of the equation." That includes evaluating safety protocols and infrastructure, exploring whether there is a business case for reversing the ban and whether it's in the best interest of fans and the university to allow alcohol to be sold.

The bottom line: Husker fans should not expect to be able to buy a beer inside Memorial Stadium next football season.

"We will not have beer at Memorial Stadium this fall," Carter said.

Some regents voiced their support shortly before the vote. Regent Tim Clare, who was elected vice chair earlier in the meeting, said there are a lot of questions that need to be answered around alcohol but the new policy "gives us an opportunity to control it."

Speaking to reporters, Clare said: "There are just a huge, huge number of questions that need to be resolved before we can sell a beer."

While fans attending Nebraska home games and matches will have to wait for the time being, attendees at the upcoming Big Ten Wrestling Championships will not.

In a separate action Friday, the regents approved allowing alcohol sales at the tournament, which runs March 5-6 at Pinnacle Bank Arena in Lincoln.

While alcohol has never been sold at Husker athletic events, it has been sold during University of Nebraska at Omaha athletic events at Baxter Arena and Tal Anderson Field. The Baxter exception was a carryover from a lease the regents endorsed in 1996 when UNO hockey was played at the Civic Auditorium.

Those exceptions have been a mark of inconsistency under the previous policy, Carter and several regents said. Regent Barbara Weitz said the newly adopted policy creates “an understanding of who decides what and when.”

“We’re all concerned and we all want to do it in a way that’s responsible,” she said.

Outside of the regents, not everyone was in favor of the alcohol-related items.

Chris Wagner, executive director of Project Extra Mile, said the organization was disappointed by the regents’ approval. He expressed concerns that setting the stage for the possibility that alcohol could be sold at athletic events would reverse the strides NU has made in curbing students’ binge drinking since the 1999 policy was enacted. Citing statistics from UNL’s website and a 2019 article from Michigan news source MLive, Wagner noted that the student binge drinking rate has fallen from 62% in 1997 to 35% in 2018.

“(The 1999 policy) has worked to reduce that (rate). Imagine if we kept it in place for another 20 years where we would be,” said Wagner, who spoke at the meeting.

Former head football coach and athletic director Tom Osborne voiced concern about the policy last week. In an interview with KETV last week, Osborne said that when alcohol is thrown into the mix, it changes the nature of the audience.

“And we’ve always treated people well at our athletic events. We’ve always (welcomed) kids and families. And so I would certainly advise them to think this over very carefully before they make this move,” Osborne told the Omaha ABC affiliate.

When reached Friday afternoon, Osborne declined to comment.

Carter said he spoke with Osborne about the revised policy before the meeting.

“I’m very respectful of coach Osborne, and I know where he stands on this,” Carter said, as he reiterated the revised policy’s focus on establishing consistency across all NU campuses. “We want to understand what the fan experience is. We want to listen to what the fans have to say.”

Potential revenue won’t be a deciding factor whether the university ultimately goes forward with selling alcohol at home athletic events, Carter said. His comments are similar to what Alberts said last month on a radio show.

On that show, Alberts said alcohol doesn’t drive attendance and it doesn’t make as much money as has been advertised. But Alberts added that he’s seen research that it may reduce binge drinking in tailgating parking lots.

By adopting the revised policy, NU is set to possibly join what appears to be a growing trend of universities selling alcohol during athletic events.

The University of Iowa became the eighth Big Ten school last fall to sell alcohol during home football games, doing it as part of a pilot program.

The Wall Street Journal reported in September that university athletic departments, including UCLA and the University of Washington, have turned to selling alcohol in stadiums on game days

to help recover from financial losses incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when football games were played in mostly empty stadiums.

The first time beer was sold inside Memorial Stadium may have been last August during country music star Garth Brooks' concert.

That's not a model for NU to follow, Carter said. He said alcohol was served before the concert all the way through the entire event.

"That probably wasn't the best event for alcohol that I've seen in my lifetime," the 62-year-old said.

Regent Elizabeth O'Connor was absent from Friday's meeting due to illness.