

Nebraska party bus companies say law targeting unauthorized buses may hurt them, too

Written by Natalie Saenz

Underage drinking and the overconsumption of alcohol on party buses are targets of a law recently signed by Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts.

State Sen. Megan Hunt of Omaha introduced LB 734 last year. The legislation would create an annual license for charter buses under the Nebraska Liquor Control Act.

The license will allow law enforcement to respond to complaints about charter buses, verify that underage drinking isn't occurring and provide accountability for the charter services.

With the governor's signature, the measure will become law July 1.

"These party buses have become a haven for underage drinking. They've turned into rolling bottle clubs," Hunt said. "This bill protects reputable party bus companies."

Hunt said the bill was introduced in reaction to the proliferation of "pirate party buses," which are personal vehicles that people transform into party buses without a formal license.

Party buses must be registered with the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Nebraska Public Service Commission and submit insurance for their vehicles' coverage. This new license from the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission will allow customers to bring their personal alcohol on the buses.

If bus companies are found to be allowing minors to drink or allowing visibly intoxicated passengers to continue drinking, the commission has the authority to suspend or revoke the party bus permit.

Party bus owners say they are worried about being held liable for any alcohol-related incidents on buses. Lori Hiebner, the owner of Leisure Limousine and Sedan in Lincoln, said she opposed the measure because she is worried about the uncertainty of the license and how the licensing will be enforced.

People who rent Hiebner's party buses sign a contract that states they are fully responsible for their guests and any damage to the vehicle. Hiebner said she is worried that party bus companies will have to police people's alcohol intake.

"Having this new license for us will mean an increased insurance premium because it is a liquor license even though we can't sell alcohol," Hiebner said.

Hiebner said the state should be more focused on finding the pirate party buses that aren't insured and are a danger to the public.

"Any Saturday night, you can go downtown and see that (those buses) don't have any markings, proper signage or proper service commission plate," Hiebner said. "You can tell which are legal and which ones aren't."

Joel Bisgard, owner of Party Express Bus Nebraska in Omaha, said he testified against the bill.

“If the police officer makes a report that includes our name, the liquor commission can technically suspend our business,” Bisgard said. “They’re putting the responsibility on us, even though we had no responsibility for anything that (the riders) consumed.”

Bisgard said his bus contracts clearly state that all people bringing and drinking alcohol on the bus must be 21 or older. He said, however, that it is difficult to catch underage drinking because party bus companies don’t have the authority to check IDs or pat down customers for hidden alcohol bottles.

“A lot of things happen that we don’t have any control over, but yet they’re putting all of the responsibility on us as a company,” Bisgard said.

Bisgard said he understands the importance of reducing underage drinking, binge drinking and pirate party buses but said the risks the measure puts on his company may be too steep. He said he has seen five pirate party buses operating in Omaha and many in Lincoln and has reported them to the Public Service Commission.

“I think the Public Service Commission is a great entity, but they don’t have the investigator doing the job,” Bisgard said.

Hunt said having all party buses licensed through the Liquor Control Commission will maintain accountability for all alcohol-related issues.

The measure, she said, requires party buses to follow the same protocol other businesses must follow when customers’ consumption of alcohol is a part of a business plan.

The executive director of Project Extra Mile, a group that works to make sure liquor laws are being enforced, supported the bill. Mixing underage youths with people of legal drinking age creates an environment that promotes underage drinking, Chris Wagner said.

“Those businesses, just like any other business, that are centered around the consumption of alcohol really need to be regulated to ensure that laws are being followed,” Wagner said.