

GUEST OPINION: Alcohol tax helps save lives at prom season

By Vic DiGravio and Maryanne Frangules

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Across Massachusetts, tens of thousands of high school juniors and seniors — including a couple hundred in Taunton tonight — are engaged in the time-honored traditions associated with the prom. Choosing dresses, renting tuxedos, washing cars, buying corsages — it's a rite of passage that provokes anxiety for everyone concerned. Especially parents.

Safety has always been a prime concern around prom season, because many teens associate prom with drinking — frequently binge drinking. And far too many, still, end up getting behind the wheel of a car after consuming alcohol.

Local school and law enforcement officials are reaching out to thwart drunk driving around prom season by an aggressive campaign of education and prevention. In Norfolk County, the Avon Coalition for Every Student released a survey showing that alcohol-use and binge drinking rates have dropped in recent years. While those numbers remain too high, the survey may help alleviate peer pressure by showing that not everyone drinks.

In Western Massachusetts, the Pittsfield Prevention Partnership, in collaboration with MADD Massachusetts, will launch the Prom Season Sticker Shock Campaign at area liquor stores.

The campaign consists of teams of young people, accompanied by an adult chaperone, placing stickers on multi-packs of alcoholic beverages (beer, wine coolers, etc.) and paper bags at participating package stores. The stickers read, "Hey You!! It is ILLEGAL to provide alcohol for people under 21!"

These and many other programs at the state and local level received a boost last year with passage of the alcohol sales tax at retail stores. The tax will bring in about \$110 million this year — a drop in the bucket

weighed against the billions of dollars in lost productivity, healthcare, counseling and law enforcement costs tied to alcohol and drug abuse.

The retail sales tax on alcohol funds services targeting underage drinkers such as the substance abuse hotline, youth intervention services, residential programs and recovery homes and driver education classes following OUI arrests.

For underage drinkers, alcohol's toll is tragic. Recent federal statistics show that Massachusetts is among the highest of all states for past month's alcohol use by underage drinkers — 32.1 to 40.5 percent of 12 to 20 year olds — and that 8.4 to 10.1 percent of those youth purchased the alcohol themselves.

Underage drinking remains a serious problem and requires constant vigilance by families, local and state officials. According to the most recent data for Massachusetts students in grades 9-12:

- 46 percent had at least one drink of alcohol on one or more occasion in the past 30 days;
- 28 percent had five or more drinks of alcohol in a row (i.e. binge drinking) in the past 30 days;
- 5 percent had at least one drink of alcohol on school property on one or more of the past 30 days.

Despite the ongoing social, healthcare and law enforcement problems associated with addiction, the alcohol industry is pushing a ballot question this fall to repeal the alcohol retail sales tax.

Those who have struggled with addiction understand that youths need all the help they can get to avoid destructive behaviors. We need the resources to provide that help, and the alcohol retail sales tax is part of the solution.

Vic DiGravio and Maryanne Frangules co-chair the Campaign for Addiction Prevention, Treatment and Recovery, which seeks to retain the retail sales tax on alcohol.

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