City Council Outlaws Drinking Alcohol In Vehicles On Streets

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The crowd broke out in applause last night when the City Council finally, after more than an hour of debate, approved a law which makes it illegal to carry alcohol in an open container in a motor vehicle. But Councilman Benny Ritchey was quick to squelch the show of emotion with a grim prediction.

“We’re going to have problems with this thing,” he said. He also pointed out that the two Council members who voted against the law may be correct in the long run. It will be up to the courts to decide whether the law is solid enough to stand when tested.

Driver Responsibility

But three votes in favor of the ordinance were all that were needed to put it on the city’s books. Voting for it were Ritchey, W.M. “Dub” Hudson (the proposal’s author) and Al Simon. Wilfred Pierre and Robert Domingue voted against it.

The ordinance states that it is unlawful for any person to drink alcoholic beverages in any private motor vehicle if it is on a public street. That includes motor homes and motorcycles. It also says it is illegal for a person to have in his possession, while in a private motor vehicle on a public street, any bottle, container or receptacle containing alcoholic beverages which has been opened or the seal broken or the contents of which have been partially removed.

The owner or driver is held responsible for following the law. The driver would be cited if an officer stops a car and finds alcohol in an open container, but can’t determine to whom it belongs.

Penalties Outlined

The maximum fine for first offense is $100 and 30 days in jail. The second offense could yield a maximum fine of $500 and 90 days in jail.

Hudson introduced the ordinance several weeks ago and pushed for its passage. Last night, he provided results of a statewide survey conducted by the Baton Rouge Safety Council.

That survey indicated that 77 percent of all groups surveyed, including men and women of all ages, favored a law which would make it illegal to either drink alcoholic beverages in automobiles or to have open alcoholic beverage containers in automobiles.

Hudson said the ordinance is not a panacea to the problem of the drinking driver. “It’s part of an overall puzzle,” he said.

Show Of Support

The District 5 Councilman got support from several citizens, including representatives of the local Task Force on Drunk Driving and the Lafayette Crime Prevention Commission.

Susan Winkler wore a bright blue T-shirt emblazoned with the initials MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.)

While speaking in favor of the ordinance, she said, “You really can’t separate a drinking driver from a drunk driver. Where do you draw that line?”

But opponents were not convinced by arguments that the new law might prevent alcohol-related accidents, reduce litter and keep teenagers from drinking and driving because they’re too young to go into lounges.

Domingue Opposed

District 1 Councilman Robert Domingue said he is against operating a vehicle while intoxicated. But the ordinance “will not help whatsoever,” he said before the vote was taken.

“I feel we have enough (laws) on the books...I think it will not help at all. It will

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