Jurors back move to ban drinking in cars

The state police jury association last week urged legislators to adopt a law that would make it illegal to drive while drinking alcoholic beverages. Lafayette Parish Police Juror Louie Campbell introduced a resolution at the state jury convention in Lake Charles calling for a stronger drinking and driving law. He also was responsible for bringing the measure before the Lafayette jury, which approved it earlier last week on a 13-2 vote.

Campbell’s resolution specifically asks legislators to “amend the laws of the State of Louisiana making it a criminal offense to drive while drinking intoxicating liquors containing alcohol contents of over three percent by volume.” Nearly all beers, wines and liquors contain alcohol at levels greater than three percent.

Campbell says his action was prompted by news reports of people being killed by drunk drivers and spurred by Candy Lightner’s recent visit to Lafayette. Lightner is the president of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, a California group. MADD has lobbied successfully for tougher drinking and driving laws in California.

“If we’re going to do anything, we need to do it now. There’s no reason to put it off,” Campbell comments.

At the local police jury meeting, the resolution first was greeted by jokes and snickers from jurors who said they couldn’t pass a resolution that might lead to passage of a law they might not be able to live with.

“Has any one of us here driven and not had a beer in our hand?” questioned Juror Gordon “Donnie” Dugal. “What we’re going to be doing is to try to pass a law we’ll have to live with. Can we live with it?” Several jurors responded by saying, “I can’t.”

Campbell interrupted the levity. “If you have to have a drink in your hand to drive from one place to another, I think you’d better go to Alcoholics Anonymous, maybe they can give you some help.”

Dugal later agreed drinking and driving is a serious problem, and he suggested the jury set a good example by approving Campbell’s resolution.

Mary Waggoner of Lafayette, mother of a 12-year-old son, told jurors an automobile can become a lethal weapon with a drunk driver at the wheel. “I’m no teetotaler myself, but once I get behind the wheel of a so many ton car, I have a weapon in my hands. And if I can’t aim it right, it’s just like a shotgun…”

Mervin Harmon and Louis Benjamin were the only local jurors to vote against the resolution. Harmon says he believes the state needs stronger enforcement of its drunk driving laws, not more laws. “I don’t think we ought to dictate to a person...as long as he’s not drunk,” Harmon says.

Under existing state laws, it is legal to drink and drive as long as the alcohol level in a person’s blood falls below .10 grams percent. State Police Troop I Commander Louis Ackal says the legal intoxication level is the equivalent of drinking 25 percent of a fifth of whiskey or more than eight cans of beer (for most average-sized adults).

Benjamin says he voted against the resolution because it wasn’t clear to him what Campbell was proposing. None of the jurors was given a copy of the resolution before they voted on it. “I was sort of confused about that thing,” Benjamin said after the meeting. “I thought it wasn’t adequately explained.”

Benjamin claims he would have voted in favor of the resolution if he had understood it more clearly at the meeting.

Police jury representatives from Lafayette, Iberia and St. Martin parishes all voted in favor of Campbell’s resolution at the state jury convention. Vermilion Parish representatives voted against the measure, Campbell says.