Panel OKs bills to raise drinking age

By JOHN LaPLANTE
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A House panel Wednesday approved two bills to raise the legal drinking age—one criticized as too weak to enforce and another considered too strong to pass a reluctant Legislature.

Spokesmen for public safety interests said the bills, which now go before the full House, are at least a step toward reducing alcohol-related traffic accidents involving young drivers.

The authors of the bills say both comply with federal laws that are threatening to block up federal highway aid if Louisiana keeps allowing those under 21 to buy alcoholic beverages.

HB73 by Rep. Jim Donelon, R-Metairie, would outlaw liquor purchases by people under 21 at a yet-unspecified date, probably late next February. Similar bills have failed to pass the Legislature in past sessions.

“I'm convinced young adults would be saved by this bill,” Donelon said.

HB110 by Rep. Margaret Lowenthal, D-Lake Charles, also raises the drinking age from 18 to 21. But it would impose smaller penalties on some violators, make many exceptions and allow some teens to keep drinking after it takes effect on March 15, 1987.

Lowenthal’s bill is almost identical to another bill that passed the Senate Tuesday.

Shesaid her bill is a good compromise— it complies with federal law and has a good chance of passing the Legislature.

“This is a progressive remedy for a specific problem and it seems to be working in other states. We should try it here,” Lowenthal said.

With resistance only from liquor interests, the House Administration of Criminal Justice Committee endorsed both bills without objection Wednesday, allowing the House to choose which bill, if any, it wants to pass.

Spokesman for public safety interests expressed dismay at the compromise, but said the Legislature should pass some kind of drinking-age bill.

“We are convinced that this bill will reduce, by some degree, drinking by young adults, and this will reduce accidents,” said Lt. Ronnie Jones, representing state police.

The big difference between Lowenthal’s bill and the Senate version is the so-called grandfather clause, which allows some young people to keep buying alcohol after the law takes effect.


Lowenthal’s bill also takes effect March 15, but it would ban alcohol sales to anyone born after Sept. 30, 1967.

Lowenthal said her bill corresponds to federal law. She said the Senate bill would not free the $1 million this year and $3 million next year that the federal government is threatening to withhold from the state’s highway construction program.

The Neeson and Lowenthal bills designate circumstances when an 18-year-old can legally drink, such as:

• When he is in the company of a parent, guardian or spouse over the age of 21;
• When he is in a private residence or private club; and
• When alcohol is being consumed for religious or medical reasons.

The lone opponent to the bills at Wednesday’s hearing was George Brown of the Beer Industry League, who said the Legislature should not “disenfranchise” young adults of the right to drink at age 18 when they have legal rights and responsibilities in all other areas of society.

Brown said that raising the drinking age can actually increase alcohol consumption slightly because 18-year-olds who might buy a single beer at a bar instead will get someone to buy them a six-pack.

Brown said the state might not lose any highway construction funds because the Congress has yet to approve a highway budget this year. He also said the law withholding the funds might be declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court early next year.