Senate passes amended drinking age bill

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The state's legal drinking age would become 21 on March 15, 1987, under a bill that cleared the Senate Tuesday.

However, the senators added an amendment providing that anyone who is 18 years old by March 15 will not be affected by the proposed law and can purchase and consume alcoholic beverages.


The bill, which among other things is intended to avoid a $15 million loss of federal highway funds, was approved 28-7 and sent to the House for action.

The senators defeated attempts to make the bill tougher with increased fines.

Sen. Richard Neeson, D-Shreveport, sponsor of the bill, said it was altered so much in the Senate Transportation Committee earlier that he hardly recognized it.

“It's very weak, it's unfair, it's confusing, it's cut up,” said Neeson on the Senate floor. But he said it was important to pass the bill despite the weaknesses.

The bill came to the Senate floor from committee with a provision making it effective upon the signature of the governor. However, the senators adopted an amendment by Sen. Cliff Newman, D-Lake Charles, establishing the March effective date. Newman said he wanted to give those who have businesses that would be affected time to sell out or adjust to the change.

The bill, SB11, increases the age for possession and purchase of alcohol from 18 to 21 to comply with a federal law. The federal law requires states to adopt the 21 limit or face loss of a percentage

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of federal highway funds. The loss would amount to $15 million the first year.

An attempt to raise the drinking age during the last regular session was narrowly defeated.

The bill designates 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 Senate rejected attempts by Sen. Sydney Nelson, D-Shreveport, to make the bill tougher. Nelson attempted unsuccessfully to raise the maximum penalty for 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds to a $300 fine instead of the $50 penalty placed in the bill in committee. The bill has a $300 fine for 17-year-old offenders.

Nelson tried unsuccessfully to remove language placed in the bill in committee saying that violations would be handled just like traffic offenses.

The Senate also rejected attempts by Nelson to remove a clause in the bill that would automatically make the state law void if the federal law which requires it is ever repealed or declared unconstitutional.

An amendment by Sen. Oswald A. Decuir, D-New Iberia, was adopted making it clear that the money from the fines, not including court costs, will go into the state general fund.


Voting against were Sens. Brinkhaus, Ginn, Guarisco, McPherson, Newman, Saunders and Nunez.

Not voting were Sens. Casey, Jumonville, Lauricella and Sevario.