Task force recommends alcohol program

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Youngsters caught possessing alcohol should participate in an alcohol education program and face suspension of a drivers licenses, a special task force has recommended.

The committee has been gathering information, hearing testimony and developing recommendations for the Metro Council and other public agencies on what can be done to cut the availability of alcohol to underaged youths.

Councilman Doug Welborn will take the recommendations to the council.

The group also will spearhead an educational program in the parish which will include more signs, public service announcements and educational materials.

The group decided that when youngsters are caught with alcohol or attempting to obtain alcohol, they would be required to participate “in a youth alcohol offenders program which includes mandatory education and screening for substance abuse as a condition of probation.”

Also, if screening determines substance or alcohol abuse, treatment would be required with parental participation included if possible.

“Drivers license suspensions as a means of penalty with consideration for hardship licenses on first offense only,” is also recommended.

Suspension on first offense would be for 90 days, with suspension for one year or until 18 years old for subsequent offenses would also be included.

Family Court Judge Jennifer Luce had told the committee that current law only allows judges to work out agreements for probation.

Those convicted of selling alcohol to juveniles may also face stiffer penalties.

The committee recommends that on first offense a clerk have his license suspended for five days, 30 days on second offense and one year on third and subsequent offenses.

The committee had also worked up stiff penalties for the retailers but Alcohol Beverage Control Director Allen West told the committee that the ABC Board has historically handed out even stiffer penalties and that the current law gives the board great leeway in handing out penalties.

“The law doesn’t need changing. We just need more enforcement and enhanced public relations,” Assistant District Attorney Warren Hebert said.

The committee voted to ask the council to pass a resolution asking for more selective enforcement and funding of special teams to crack down on alcohol violations by minors.

West said one area in which increased enforcement emphasis is needed is on the purchase by minors as opposed to the sale by clerks.

On the educational front, the group wants to enhance parental involvement and more emphasis on the illegality of alcohol in driver education classes.

It also plans public service announcements to encourage participation in reporting the sale of alcohol to minors, encouraging identification presentation when buying alcohol, reminders of the laws against juvenile alcohol consumption and purchase and encourage the responsible use of alcohol by adults.

A “hot-line” is also planned for those who wish to report allegations of alcohol sales to minors.

Some members of the group wanted to make presentation of identification mandatory when buying alcohol, but that was beaten back primarily on the objections of those in the retail sector who were representatives on the committee.

The committee also did not go along with a proposal that the only valid identification be a Louisiana drivers license. Hebert argued along with the retailers, but his argument was not inconvenience to shoppers but that the burden is already on the retailer to make sure that the person buying the alcohol is old enough.

The committee also voted to make conviction by courts on criminal charges tantamount to a formal complaint to the civil ABC board of a violation.

Co-chairmen Dr. Harold Brandt and Steve Graber will work with Welborn to draft proposed changes to ordinances and resolutions which will be presented to the council for action.