

# Self-serve beer, wine on tap in Michigan?

Gary Heinlein, Detroit News Lansing Bureau 12 a.m. EST February 9, 2015



(Photo: Elizabeth Robertson / AP)

Lansing — Possibly coming soon to a bar or restaurant near you: tableside devices so customers can tap their own drinks such as wine, or a "wall of beer" where they can draw a favorite amber or stout from a row of self-serve spigots.

A rule change proposed by the state Liquor Control Commission would have Michigan join the large majority of states that have welcomed this imbibing method that the founder and CEO of a company called [pourmybeer.com](http://pourmybeer.com) says he now has in 200 locations across the country. The website shows he has clients in 37 states.

"We just landed contracts for (Chicago's) O'Hare Airport and Milwaukee's airport," said Josh Goodman, who has been in the business for six years. "The applications for (alcohol) self-serve are just breaking the ice."

Goodman said he'd be happy to see the rules change in Michigan since he had a deal to install some dispensers at the MGM Grand Casino in Detroit before the Liquor Control Commission determined state rules prohibit alcohol dispensing of any kind.

But the proposed change is drawing opposition from groups that fear the self-serve options could lead to more alcoholism as well as abuse by teens and adults.

"In general, there is increased risk for underage drinking and overserving," said Monique Stanton, president and CEO of CARE of Southeastern Michigan, who testified at a commission hearing on the proposal. "I see these dispensing machines as an opportunity to increase binge drinking, rather than decrease it."

Interest from casinos and a few other establishments was part of the rationale behind a tentative commission decision to modify a rule commission Chairman Andrew Deloney said has been in effect for a long time, although he's uncertain how long.

The proposed change also falls in line with an effort by Deloney and the commission to update regulations that date to the post-Prohibition era and shed ones that no longer make sense.

"We feel it is something folks in the industry would want to have available, but at the same time we recognize the issue of public health," Deloney said. "We know what happens when alcohol is abused."

The commission considered allowing liquor to be included in the proposal, too, but decided against it at this point, Deloney said.

"This is something that's never been allowed before," he said. "And we decided spirits are in a different category."

## Delivery systems

Here's how it would work: When customers go to a bar or restaurant with a group of friends, the server could provide a dispenser with enough of their favorite alcoholic beverage so each member of the group could have a couple of drinks. If customers wanted more, they would have to ask the server to set up the dispenser with a fresh supply.

An alternative delivery system offers multiple spigots on a serving wall. Patrons go up to the wall, choose their drink, and pull their own beverage.

Deloney said Michigan's proposal would allow establishments to use dispensing equipment in various ways, as long as there's still the usual monitoring against overindulgence and the serving of minors.

The new rule would limit the amount in a self-serve dispenser to 96 ounces, which would have to be ordered from a waiter or waitress.

Michigan is among the minority of states — others include Texas, Oregon, Utah, Vermont and Connecticut — that don't allow alcohol self-dispensing machines, said Goodman, who lives in Chicago and heads one of several companies in the business.

Goodman said the concept for [pourmybeer.com](http://pourmybeer.com) was born when he couldn't get a beer while at a busy bar with friends.

"It also occurred to me that the bar owner was losing money by not selling me a beer," he said. Since he was in the information technology staffing business at the time, Goodman looked for a way to marry software with beer serving.

"I developed a prototype, it went in a bar in Baltimore, and we were on our way," he said.

While 90 percent of the business initially involved the dispensing of beer, Goodman said, the portion involving wine and liquor has grown to about a quarter of his sales now, and there's an expanding array of possible uses.

Hotel companies can install dispensing devices in rooms, where customers would use their key cards to activate the taps and charge drinks to their accounts. Goodman said Major League Baseball is interested and other venues, including the Green Bay Packers football stadium, already have them.

### **Dangers cited**

But it's precisely the chief selling point of ease and convenience that worries groups battling alcoholism and underage drinking — including the Michigan Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking, Michigan Council on Alcohol Problems and Lenawee Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition.

There's a danger servers won't as closely monitor how much their customers are consuming, or whether minors are tapping drinks for themselves, said Stanton, whose Fraser-based nonprofit Community Assessment Referral and Education deals with substance abuse, mental health, family crisis prevention and employment assistance.

Mike Tobias, who heads the Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking, agrees with the assessment.

"Gov. (Rick) Snyder has a dashboard item on reducing excessive alcohol consumption on the state website," Tobias said. "I don't think he's moved the needle much on that. I don't think this is going to help at all."

Opponents can continue to press their objections because the new rules, once finalized, have to go through two more steps before they take effect: reviews by the Office of Regulatory Reinvention and the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, which is made up of state lawmakers.

The Legislature can reject the proposal when it is under consideration by the Joint Committee.

But Deloney said the Liquor Control Commission considered the public health implications and decided this kind of self-service isn't much different from groups of people ordering pitchers of beer or bottles of wine for their tables.

The dispensers give establishments more control over how much their customers drink, he said, because they track the number of ounces tapped off by the customers.

It's an argument pourmybeer.com's Goodman also makes.

"With our system, they can literally look at a table or booth and see exactly how much has been consumed," he said.

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