

City Council: Novato should be an 'alcopop free zone'

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The Novato City Council Tuesday night joined Marin County supervisors and San Rafael's City Council in endorsing an effort to make the region an "alcopop free zone" by passing a resolution urging retailers to eschew sales of flavored malt and related alcoholic beverages that appeal to youth.

The council voted unanimously in favor of the move after more than 15 teens and adults spoke in its favor to the crowd of about 60 people at the meeting. Representatives of the Novato Youth Center, the Novato Youth Partnership, the Healthy Marin Partnership and Healthy Novato, among others, urged council members to vote yes.

"I felt good that they agreed with us," said Alexis Simon, an 18-year-old student at Nova Independent Study High School and a Novato resident. "I have a younger sibling and it will be safer for her to socialize without being pressured by Novato kids to drink along."

"We're happy to see you here participating in the democratic process," Mayor Denise Athas told the young people who filed to the front of the packed room, one after another, to urge the council members to pass the resolution. Compliance with the resolution is voluntary, though several Novato businesses have already indicated willingness to cooperate, according to Don Carney, a spokesman for the Novato Blue Ribbon Coalition for Youth.

"Alcopop sells for \$1.45 per container," Megan Paddack, a San Marin High School senior, told the councilmembers. "It is dangerous to our community."

Alcopops include a variety of ready-to-go alcoholic drinks, such as Smirnoff Ice, Skyy Blue, Stolichnaya Citrona, Bacardi Silver, Captain Morgan Gold, Mike's Hard Lemonade, Blast, Tilt, Four Loko and Jeremiah Weed Spiked Cola. The beverages are often brightly packaged and sweetly flavored like soda pop, and are sometimes super-sized and super-charged with alcohol, with one can the alcoholic equivalent of four beers.

More than 10 million American youth under the age of 21 drink alcohol, and over a million of them are binge drinkers, according to the American Medical Association. "A majority of teens 17-18 years old (51 percent) and many teens 14-16 years old (35 percent) have tried alcopops, compared to less than a quarter of adults (24 percent)," the association reported.

"Alcopops are a predatory product. Combined with driving or drugs, they can permanently impact not only the lives of the people who consume them but those of others as well. We need to attack this problem at the source by getting this product off the shelves and out of our young peoples' lives," said Hart Fogel, a freshman at San Francisco University High School and a Mill Valley resident.

The "alcopop free zone" initiative approved by the county last spring at the urging of Supervisors Judy Arnold and Steve Kinsey asserted that alcopops are "a minimal percentage of retailer alcohol sales but a huge percentage of underage consumption," and declared officials "support the establishment of an alcopop free zone in this county and ... encourage all alcohol retailers to voluntarily stop buying, stocking, selling and marketing alcopops."