

# Ruston Daily Leader

## Alcohol replay: Stay tuned

ADD ONE

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*By Nancy Bergeron*

John Hatch is confident his troops will be able to gather enough verifiable signatures from Ruston voters to put an expanded alcohol-sale proposition on the ballot in March.

And with Mayor Ronny Walker sort of helping to lead the charge this time, Hatch may be right.

Walker and his wife were the first to sign the now-active petition that, if successful, effectively would allow voters to decide whether grocery stores should be able to sell wine and high-content alcohol.

But it isn't the city that's doing the asking: It's Walmart and Brookshire's. Brookshire's is the parent company of Super 1 Foods. Technically, the petition is being carried by the Louisiana Economic Growth Committee.

That's a political action committee that Walmart and Brookshire's support. Since 2016, the PAC has been successful in convincing voters in Minden, Pineville, Springhill, Oak Grove, Haughton and part of Bossier Parish to go from dry or damp to some variation of wet concerning alcohol sales.

The first hurdle is getting verifiable signatures from 25% of Ruston voters. That's, 2,454 people, according to the Lincoln Parish Registrar of Voters office.

Four years ago, a petition identical to the current one fell short by 31 signatures. That was after the former registrar of voters first released numbers showing backers had gotten 16 more signatures that they needed.

But officials discovered the initial count was done under verbiage of a state law that had changed three months before, and the number really fell short. Verbiage shouldn't be a problem this time.

Yet if the referendum is called, more than just the corporations' druthers are at stake. Louisiana law requires the ballot to have five "yes" or "no" alcohol propositions. Each proposition is voted on separately, and each passes or fails independent of the others.

It's the same process Ruston voters faced in 2002 when a group of citizens concerned about economic development in the city formed a political action group called LINCPAC and pushed a change in the law so that restaurants could serve wine and mixed drinks.

Voters approved the change, and economic development soared. It was already legal for Ruston convenience stores and grocery stores to sell beverages containing no more than 6% alcohol and for local restaurants to serve them. It still is.

But only because voters reaffirmed that legality in 2002.

What's tricky is if the proposed new referendum comes about, everything will be up for grabs. Three of the required five propositions are already legal in Ruston.

But that doesn't matter. They'll have to be voted on again.

That means if city voters want stores to continue to be able to sell low-alcohol content beverages, and if they want restaurants to be able to serve those same sorts of beverages, they're going to have to vote to continue those.

Plus, if voters want to continue to be able to buy wine or other high-alcohol drinks in Ruston restaurants, they're going to have to vote to keep that, too.

The other two propositions deal with high-content alcohol. One would legalize the sale for consumption on premises. That means bars, which Ruston doesn't have. The other proposition would allow high-content alcohol sales in package only, not consumption on premises. That's the one the Brookshire's and Walmart want.

The rationale is that Ruston stores are losing out on revenue from customers who buy beer, wine or liquor in Grambling and Monroe, and that the city's losing potential sales tax revenue.

So far, nobody's given specific estimates, but that's likely to happen this week.

Hatch hopes to file the signed petitions to Registrar of Voters Sharon Parnell around Oct. 21. Whenever he does, Parnell's staff will have 30 days, excluding weekends and holidays, to verify the signatures.

If enough signatures are good, by law the Board of Aldermen must call a referendum. They'll have to do that by Dec. 28 to make the March ballot.

Unlike in years past, there's been no widespread anti-alcohol outcries. They may come yet. Or not. As we said four years ago, stay tuned.

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