



A BEVERAGE BIZ LOOK AHEAD AT THE MARYLAND 2025

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

WRITTEN BY TEDDY DURGIN

Each December, I write up a legislative preview for readers of the Beverage Journal that typically begins with a look back at the wins and losses the Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA) saw in Annapolis over the past year. But as our three interviewees pointed out, sometimes a victory is not a bill being passed or a restriction lifted.

Attorney and MSLBA lobbyist J. Steven "Steve" Wise correctly noted, "Sometimes wins are found in what did not happen. We staved off bills that would have allowed beer and wine sales in supermarkets, lowered lottery commissions to 5.5%, and allowed the direct shipment of alcohol into Maryland from virtually anywhere. That none of those things happened is a win!"

MSLBA Legislative co-Chair David Marberger of Bay Ridge Wine & Spirits in Annapolis concurs, singling out the biggest "did-not-happen" triumph: "Being able to stave off beer and wine sales in grocery stores is always a victory. [chuckling] You can pencil that in for our conversation next year and every year after that!"

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J. Steven 'Steve' Wise, MSLBA lobbyist

But MSLBA's other Legislative co-Chair Jack Milani is only breathing a small sigh of relief. He stated, "The grocers seem to be pushing it a bit more. You're seeing signage in some stores. Every year, we have to gear back up and put the fight on because this issue is not going to go away. We just have to keep reminding our local senator and delegates of how important it is for that not to happen to us. Every year we hold off the chain store bill is a good year."

Vigilance was a common theme in talking with all three men. Past leaders both real and fictional, everyone from President Thomas Jefferson to Captain Jean-Luc Picard, have referred to vigilance in the face of possible tyranny as the "price we pay." Marberger urged, "Be involved, and pay attention. If you're not paying attention to what your city council is doing or your county council is doing, then you're going to be making phone calls a day or two after things go into effect. And that's going to be too late."

Milani, proprietor of Monaghan's Pub in Baltimore, added, "They're looking for ways to figure out how to balance this year's budget. And our fear is that when they're looking

for money, they are going to come after us. They're going to tax – sales tax, alcohol tax, a 'God only knows' tax."

So what are the one or two biggest legislative issues they foresee impacting Maryland's beer, wine, and spirits business in 2025? Wise was quick to answer. "The state's budget situation, which according to budget analysts is the worst they have ever seen, could affect the industry in a variety of ways," he cautioned. "If the General Assembly's answer to the problem is higher taxes, alcohol tax rates are a concern. If new revenues are considered, the introduction of iLottery would be a concern because of its effect on brick and mortar locations. Or, if reduced spending is the answer, reductions in lottery commissions are of concern."

Wise warned that an "under the radar" issue owners of packaged goods stores, in particular, should keep an eye on is "a bottle bill proposal" making the rounds "that would require retailers to store returned bottles, which is just not a practical solution."

Milani agreed, further noting, "You'd have to have twice as much room if you're going to have that many empties coming back. Most

folks today do single-stream recycling."

All three interviewees went on to offer advice to anyone reading this article who would like to get more involved in the political side. Marberger said to take any questions or concerns directly to the legislators themselves. "When I got involved in this, the last thing that I was – and the last thing, even now, I consider myself – is a political person," he said. "Just by calling your local elected official, whether it's a city council member or a state delegate or a senator, they really do want to hear your opinion. If they are not hearing what you have to say, I guarantee you the opposition has already contacted that same individual and given them their opinion."

He continued, "A lot of times, you won't get the elected official. You'll get a staff member. That's fine! Those staff members work their tails off to be educated and informed about the issues, and they'll have a conversation with you."

Milani further elaborated: "It's so important to make acquaintances with your local elected officials, especially prior to the session. Get to know your senator and your del-

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David Marberger, MSLBA Legislative Chairman



“Get to know your senator and your delegates ... make sure they know who you are, and let them know they or their staff can reach you if they have questions. Once you get a relationship with these officials, you’ll find a lot of times they will call you and ask you questions. They have hundreds of bills every year, and they don’t know everything ... if they’ll just hear us out, at least we will have a shot.”

Jack Milani, MSLBA Legislative Chairman



egates. If nothing else, at least have an opportunity to discuss anything that comes up. Don’t wait until you’re up against a wall. Do it before the session, make sure they know who you are, and let them know they or their staff can reach you if they have questions. Once you get a relationship with these officials, you’ll find a lot of times they will call you and ask you questions. They have hundreds of bills every year, and they don’t know everything. We may not always get the result we’re looking for. But if they’ll just hear us

out, at least we will have a shot.”

He added, “The good thing about the MSLBA is we do meet almost weekly once the session starts. The legislative committee meets, goes over every bill, and creates our positions. We come up with talking points and start meeting with individual members. Anyone who has an interest, please contact our office. You will definitely be more in tune with what’s going on.”

Wise concluded by offering praise one last time to Tom “Goose” Kaiser, the beverage in-

dustry legend who passed away earlier this year. “He was the gold standard for someone in the alcohol business who also knew the importance of being involved in Annapolis,” he said. “But folks don’t have to achieve Goose’s legendary status to contribute. If they make the effort to join MSLBA, know their local elected officials, and be involved, they will see the impact on their business in a very short time.” ■

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