

LEGISLATURE

One drinking bill dies; another advances

By **CHRIS FRINK**

Capitol news bureau

The House Judiciary Committee killed one bill aimed at curbing youth drinking Wednesday night and gave another bill aimed at curbing drinking and driving a favorable recommendation.

Rep. A.G. Crowe's House Bill 825 would have prohibited people under 21 from entering bars. The legal drinking age is 21.

The loophole that allows people under 21 into bars encourages them to break the law, the Pearl River Republican told the committee.

And break the law they do, Crowe said: "We know it's happening all over the state."

Allowing 18- and 19- and 20-year-olds to go in bars but not drink is "some-what an embarrassment" to the state, Crowe said. Poll after poll shows Louisiana residents want to close the loophole, he said.

"What we're talking about here is money," said Elizabeth Carline, a director of Hope Networks, a drug- and alcohol-abuse prevention group.

More than 20 percent of alcohol sales in the state goes to underage drinkers, she said.

The other money issue is the al-

cohol industry's campaign contributions to the committee, Carline said.

"Send a clear message," she said. "Your vote cannot be bought by the alcohol industry."

"I'm appalled that you would come in here with that attitude," said Rep. Yvonne Welch, D-Baton Rouge. "I can't be bought."

Many legislators believe, no matter what the courts have ruled, that the age of majority is 18 and should be across the board, committee chairman Joseph Toomy, R-Gretna, said.

Rep. Alex Heaton, D-New Orleans,

said he opposed the bill because it would hurt the music industry in his district by barring people under 21 from attending music shows in establishments that serve liquor.

The committee voted unanimously to defer the bill, effectively killing it for this year.

"I expected that," Crowe said after the vote. He failed with a similar bill two years ago.

Sen. Joel Chaisson, D-Destrehan, had better luck with Senate Bill 479, which would effectively ban drinking alcoholic beverages in a vehicle.

Current law bans drivers from drinking. Chaisson's bill, if it clears

the House, would extend that ban to passengers with a few exceptions. For instance, any passenger in a motor home longer than 21 feet could drink.

Allowing passengers to drink encourages children who witness them drinking to associate drinking and driving, said Cathy Childers of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

The vote was 7-3 to advance the bill. Reps. Welch, Heaton and Cedric Richmond, D-New Orleans, voted against the bill.

SB 479 has already cleared the Senate and now heads to the Full House.

Handwritten notes: *10/22 Chaisson 479*