

To: Joint Committee on Addiction and Community Safety Response

My name is Pam Pearce, and I am writing in strong support of House Bill 3197. I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony on this critical piece of legislation, which proposes an incremental retail tax on alcoholic beverages and dedicates the revenue to youth substance abuse prevention programs and county-level services.

The Need for Action

Oregon faces a serious dilemma regarding substance use, particularly alcohol. While I respect the concern that our state must use taxpayer dollars responsibly—and share the broad hesitation about imposing higher taxes—I believe HB 3197 offers a practical way to address the rising healthcare, public safety, and productivity costs fueled by alcohol misuse. Alcohol is inflicting grave damage on Oregonians, including families and communities, through preventable harm and devastating loss of life.

Personal Freedom vs. Public Health

Many Oregonians rightly take pride in progressive values and individual freedom. But with that freedom comes responsibility. When excessive alcohol use creates substantial public costs and needless suffering, simply standing by falls short of the kind of collective accountability our state needs. HB 3197 balances personal choice with fairness: Those who choose to consume and those who profit from alcohol must contribute more equitably to mitigating its societal impact.

Addressing a Harmful Narrative

It has been argued that youth alcohol consumption is at an all-time low, rendering the stated need for ‘youth prevention’ unfounded. This comparison is akin to declaring we no longer need seat belts because car crash fatalities have decreased over the years, which is profoundly dismissive of the real issues at stake. According to the latest data (2023) from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Oregon’s youth alcohol consumption ranks second in the nation, significantly exceeding the national average. This directly contradicts the assertion that ‘youth alcohol consumption is at an all-time low’ and highlights the danger of perpetuating narratives that undermine prevention efforts.

To trivialize the real harms facing our youth and disregard compelling data and the lived experiences of families and communities across Oregon. Statements denying the need for youth prevention programs or minimizing the dangers of underage drinking reflect the kind of willful blindness we can no longer afford. Instead of dismissing the problem, we must confront it with comprehensive prevention strategies that inform and protect our young people.

The Danger of Willful Blindness

We cannot afford, under any circumstances, to remain willfully blind to the immense harm caused by alcohol-related issues. This is not an attempt to blame the industry; they have fulfilled their role in bringing a product to market that the public is eager to purchase. However, circumstances evolve, and we now possess more information that we can no longer ignore, necessitating a change in our current direction. The notion that once you know, you must do better is now upon us.

Remaining passive will harm everyone—including the substance industries themselves—because history provides a stark warning through the plight of the tobacco industry, which once thrived by ignoring and downplaying mounting scientific evidence of harm, only to face costly lawsuits and enduring public backlash. Tobacco, the leading cause of substance-use deaths, is closely followed by alcohol, which is responsible for around 3 million global deaths annually, even among non-addicted individuals. These are facts; history teaches us what will come if we ignore the obvious.

Alcohol faces a similar trajectory if industry leaders do not address the health risks and impacts on communities. Instead of denying these escalating issues, the industry would benefit from implementing meaningful solutions that support both public welfare and long-term sustainability.

Deflecting Responsibility

All too often, we observe an impulse to shift blame—whether by emphasizing others’ financial mismanagement or insisting that an industry is struggling—and use this to avoid reforms aimed at protecting public health. It is troubling to frame genuine and urgent problems, such as youth substance misuse, as mere inconveniences that obstruct industry profits. In effect, this approach dismisses the very real harm endured by countless Oregonians and reduces comprehensive prevention efforts to a bargaining chip.

Minimizing significant health risks, deflecting accountability for mismanaged funds, or emphasizing corporate hardship over the loss of life are shortsighted strategies that preserve the status quo and protect the privileged at the expense of the vulnerable. Far from providing genuine solutions, these arguments highlight the inequities inherent in the current system. Continuing to prioritize such interests—essentially placing profit above our communities’ well-being—is both cynical and dangerous.

To disregard the need for prevention by reducing alcohol consumption to “moderate users” overlooks a growing body of research indicating that any amount of alcohol—even low or moderate use—raises the risk of certain cancers and other health conditions. Public health guidance evolves with scientific findings, so continuing to present consumption as “harmless if moderate” is a disservice to Oregonians. If anything, the new research emphasizes the importance of comprehensive education and prevention strategies—which HB 3197 directly supports.

Considering all these points, the choice is clear: We cannot overlook critical accountability concerns or dismiss the real, science-backed risks of alcohol. Instead, we should aim to address any fiscal mismanagement while investing in effective prevention to safeguard the health and well-being of Oregon’s youth and communities.

Earmarking Funds for Prevention

I strongly support the bill’s stipulation that 85% of the revenue be allocated to youth-focused prevention programs, while the remaining 15% is distributed to Oregon’s counties. We must ensure that the funds reach the “end user”—the young people and families most vulnerable to the harms of alcohol. Critics may argue that tax increases do not deter drinking—especially among youth—yet numerous public health studies demonstrate that higher prices effectively reduce underage and binge drinking. The notion that price does not influence behavior is simply unfounded, and it is shameful for the industry to continue promoting this narrative; stick to what you know.

Accountability and Transparency

I share the concern that tax revenue does not always reach its intended destination. HB 3197 requires the Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission to report on the number of youth served and the number of counselors employed in relevant programs, a crucial step toward ensuring effective oversight, accountability, and transparency.

Conclusion

Oregon now stands at a crossroads: our state must align its values with its practical needs, showing that integrity lies not only in what is said but also in what is done. The time has come for decisive action—

House Bill 3197 recognizes that Oregon’s noninterventionist approach to alcohol-related harm has failed to adequately protect our communities, especially our youth. By introducing a modest retail tax on alcoholic beverages and directing those funds towards prevention and support services, we can begin to restore a sense of fairness and save countless lives in the process. I respectfully urge you to pass HB 3197 and ensure it is enacted with the full accountability and transparency that Oregonians expect and deserve.

Sincerely,

Pam Pearce