

## Grocers launch public campaign for wine legislation

**8:20 PM, Aug 6, 2013**

*By Samantha Hearn | The Tennessean*

Tennesseans can tell their legislators they want wine in grocery stores through the Red White and Food campaign, a coalition established by Kroger and the Tennessee Grocer's Association that's setting up postcard stands in stores all over the state.

"The legislators say that they hear from their constituents on this issue consistently," said Emily Ogden of Red White and Food. "There's broad support for this."

During the 2013 legislative session, Sen. Bill Ketron and Rep. John Lundberg called for a referendum that would allow Tennesseans to vote on the issue. The bill did not pass, but Red White and Food pushed the legislation further.

Two committees in the Senate did vote to pass the bill, taking it further than it has ever gone -- and leaving proponents optimistic about the 2014 legislative session.

"This is an issue that people actually pay attention to," said Melissa Eads, Community Affairs Manager for Kroger's mid-south division. "The difference with it being a local referendum is that people would be able to vote on it, so if you have communities that don't want to have it then they can vote not to have it."

Wish Wine Were Here, the kickoff event for the campaign, happened Tuesday at Green Hills Kroger, giving customers the opportunity to fill out postcards as they shopped.

"All the research that's been done shows that close to 70 percent of Tennesseans want this," said Eads.

Those in the local liquor store industry see the referendum differently, as a threat to small businesses.

"The wine in grocery stores issue is much more complex than it appears on the surface," said Phil Wilson, manager of a West Side wine and liquor store. "For those people who think it will have no effect upon the retailers, look at all the towns where there's a WalMart and then go look at their local shops and see them shut down."

Wilson, who has been in the business for over 30 years, sees a similar future for the liquor industry if grocery stores are allowed to sell wine. He framed it in slippery-slope terms.

"It'll be wine now, and in a couple of years it'll be liquor and then a few years after that it'll be the WalMarts and the big box stores trying to cut out the wholesalers and deal directly with large liquor conglomerates," he said. "There's approximately 550 to 600 retailers in Tennessee, and it will put probably a third to half of them out of business within two years. These are people whose total life investments and years of hard work will go down the drain."

Red White and Food says on its website that wine sales in grocery stores don't adversely affect liquor outlets, claiming retailers and wholesalers would benefit. Wilson doesn't think so.

"The grocery store industry is pushing to get more and more, and to consolidate more and more to where the big conglomerates try to push out the small retailers, the wholesalers, the small businesses," he said. "How many of them will lose their jobs when wine comes to grocery stores? The better question is how many of us will lose our jobs when wine goes to grocery stores?"