

Bill asks vote on raising drinking age

The Associated Press

JUNEAU — Raising Alaska's legal drinking age to 21, could make the state's highways safer, the director of the Alaska Council on Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Abuse told a House panel Thursday.

Drivers from 18 to 20 years old are extraordinarily prone to automobile accidents and more apt to lose control when they drink, Barbara Hoffman told the House Judiciary Committee.

The committee is considering a bill calling for an advisory vote on the issue. Voters would express their opinions at the first general election after passage of the bill.

Consultants on alcoholism testified both for and against the legislation. An expert hired by the alcohol council said

figures show social problems involving youths are declining in states where the drinking age has been raised. An expert hired by bar and restaurant owners said the figures are inconclusive.

Frank Lee, who last year supported the bill but this year testified in opposition to it for an Anchorage bar and restaurant association, said data can be interpreted in many ways.

Bar and restaurant owners don't think the proposed advisory ballot offers the right question, he said, suggesting the legislature consider a vote on raising the age of majority from 19 to 21.

The voting age and the age for other legal responsibilities should be tied to the drinking age, he said.

The bill before the Judiciary Committee restricts the change in the legal age to "the purpose of regulation of the sale, consumption, service, furnishing, barter, purchase, gift or delivery of intoxicating liquor."

Rep. Charles Anderson, R-Anchorage, said he is bothered by the idea of "legislating against" 19- to 21-year-olds.

Committee Chairwoman Ramona Barnes, R-Anchorage, and Rep. Randy Phillips said they have been getting cards on the issue saying, "I'm 18. I vote."

Bill sponsor Rep. Terry Martin, R-Anchorage, said the bill has political ramifications that make some politicians nervous, but he argued polls show Alaskans strongly in favor of changing the drinking age.