

## Too drunk to drive? New California law could give you a free ride

By Daniel Wilson

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It's an all-too-familiar scene in Sacramento. A group of friends heads to midtown for a night of partying and drinking, but one friend has to miss out on the fun and stay sober to be the designated driver.

A new law that takes effect Jan. 1 may not only let everyone join in on the fun, but it'll also mean more money for the bubbly.

Under Assembly Bill 711, alcohol manufacturers and licensed sellers can offer free or discounted rides to transport drinkers home safely through ride-sharing services, taxicabs or other ride providers.

Vouchers or codes can be given to alcohol sellers or directly to consumers, but cannot be offered as incentives to buy a company's product. Current law restricts alcohol licensees from offering discounts of anything more than inconsequential value to consumers, though liquor and wine manufacturers have been temporarily allowed to pay for rides for people attending private, invitation-only events.

The measure, by Assemblyman Evan Low, D-Cupertino, would relax the rules to expand that program, allowing alcohol manufacturers to underwrite free or discounted rides in all cases.

Low noted that thousands attending the Super Bowl 50 in Santa Clara in 2016 didn't have options to get home safely after drinking. Forty-four other states and the District of Columbia allow liquor manufacturers to pay for free or discounted rides, according to a legislative analysis of the bill.

The bill cleared the Legislature unanimously, and was supported by major beer manufacturers as well as ride-sharing company Lyft. Last year, Anheuser-Busch partnered with Lyft to offer rides home across 33 "safe ride" programs throughout the nation.

Katja Zastrow, vice president of Corporate Social Responsibility for Anheuser-Busch, said since teaming up with the ride-sharing service, the program has provided more than 64,000 rides. "Drunk driving is 100 percent preventable and offering safe rides is one way that we can have a real impact on reducing (it)," she said.

The bill was opposed by Alcohol Justice, a San Rafael-based nonprofit that lobbies against policy thought to promote the “alcohol industry’s harmful practices,” according to the group’s website.

Carson Benowitz-Fredericks, the organization’s research manager, said AB 711 could encourage people to drink more. Alcohol Justice says overconsumption of alcohol costs California \$35 billion a year and causes 10,500 deaths annually.

“The idea that drunk driving is the only harm from alcohol is a real misunderstanding of alcohol harm,” Benowitz-Fredericks said.

The main concern from both Benowitz-Fredericks and the Rev. James Butler, the executive director of the California Council on Alcohol Problems, is that though the bill says the rides should be provided in order to get drinkers safely home, there is no real way to prevent consumers from using the free rides to go to another drinking spot.

“If they get free transportation, maybe instead of two beers they have six,” Butler said. “And when people overconsume alcohol, they make bad decisions.”