

Liquor stores busted in sting

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All of an estimated 20 cold beer and wine stores targeted in an undercover operation in Prince George were caught breaking a law that prohibits them from selling alcohol to someone obviously drunk.

"Provincial inspectors posing as intoxicated persons went into many establishments," said a spokesperson with the B.C. Liquor Control and Licensing Branch, which carried out the operation.

"In all circumstances there was zero per cent compliance. Not one passed."

No fines were handed out or disciplinary action taken other than a citation on each establishment's record that could be used in future proceedings.

The law itself isn't fair and neither was the operation, according to a number of cold beer and wine store operators questioned by The Citizen. Many said their staff have guidelines about how to judge the highly subjective nature of intoxication, and the disguised inspectors were not believed to be drunk at all.

"My staff person who served them said he just looked like he was acting and the woman with him was totally fine," said Claudia Bird, manager of the cold beer and wine store at the Astoria Hotel/Joe's Place. "It can be really hard to judge something like that. Myself, two drinks and I'm drunk. Who has the right to dictate how much we are allowed to drink and where the cutoff is? If you are not driving, what's the problem? A person could get as drunk as they like at home or at a barbecue and I guess that's OK as long as you got all your liquor in advance."

Rose Meyer of the Alpine Pub's liquor store had an equally sharp view of the LCLB's tactics. Hers was another establishment cited in the operation.

"There is one word for that. It is called entrapment," Meyer said. "If someone is posing drunk there is a big difference between that and those who are drunk. How can they pursue anything legally when the act of noncompliance was not present? We served alcohol to someone who was just annoying, not intoxicated, and that was obvious to us. If they do decide to pursue this legally, they'll have a tiger on their ass."

Meyer said she was recently served with a notice of noncompliance on another matter and was about to pay the fine when she checked the details of the ticket.

"I realized they had sent us a citation, but it was for someone else's liquor business," she said. "They make mistakes and so do cold beer and wine stores, but this acting business was going too far."

Several liquor vendors told stories of people with visible physical challenges making purchases and being mistaken for intoxicated, to the staff's embarrassment. More than one local vendor stung by the operation said staff judged the actor to be the sufferer of tremors and staggers, was sometimes obnoxious, but had clear eyes indicating sobriety.

Stores were also investigated and cited in Vanderhoof, Fraser Lake, Fort Fraser and Quesnel.

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