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## Britain has sobering lessons for Michigan

REP. BERT JOHNSON

When it comes to alcohol, the news from the United Kingdom is downright frightening compared with Michigan.

"Two-thirds of Scotland's ambulances are called out on weekends to deal with alcohol-related illness or violence, new figures have suggested." That's from the Telegraph on Oct. 5, 2009.

On Aug. 21, 2009, the British Broadcasting Corp. reported more than 440 people were arrested for alcohol-related violence in Manchester -- in one Friday night alone.

And on Jan. 2 this year, the Sun headline said it all: "New Year's Heave." It went on to report that thousands of Britons were violently ill from binge drinking and alcohol abuse, now Britain's top public health concern.

For policymakers in the United States, the U.K.'s alcohol problems are a sobering reminder of what happens when alcohol is deregulated. As chairman of Michigan's House Regulatory Reform Committee, I understand the importance of regulating alcohol -- and the catastrophes that can result without effective regulation.

When Michigan was sued recently to open up direct shipment of alcohol to Michiganders from profit-hungry retailers across the country with little to no regulation, I voted with legislators from both parties to shut it down. When unregulated alcohol crosses state lines, there is no way to ensure it is bought and received legally, that the recipient is of legal drinking age, or that the products are safe. These are all risks too big to take.

Alcohol is different from other consumer products. When used responsibly and in moderation, it can be an acceptable component of our social scene. However, if consumed in excess or by minors, it can be a deadly and destructive substance. That's why strong regulation is vital to control its distribution, sales and consumption -- because without it, Michigan risks opening the door to widespread abuses, just like in the United Kingdom.

Thanks to strong regulations, Michigan is heading in the right direction. Alcohol-related traffic deaths in Michigan dropped 7 percent between 2007 and '08. In the U.K., on the other hand, youth intoxication, alcohol-induced diseases like liver cirrhosis and urban crime have reached epidemic proportions.

A 2009 U.S. report blames alcohol deregulation for the United Kingdom's troubles, saying deregulation dismantled controls and accountability and created the conditions now plaguing the U.K. If the United States deregulated alcohol, the U.K.'s problems could hit our communities, warned the report by Pam Erickson, a former alcohol regulator.

The United States severely punishes drunken drivers and those who provide alcohol to minors. All alcohol businesses must undergo background checks or risk losing their licenses. We also require alcohol to move through a traceable chain of custody among producers, distributors and retailers.

Our system works, but it is under attack. Powerful special alcohol interests from out of state want to gut Michigan's time-tested regulations. They're using our courts to undermine Michigan laws that Michigan citizens want and support. All too often, they're winning and that's putting Michigan citizens at risk.

Michigan must stand up and say no to these out-of-state alcohol interests who want to gut our laws so they can make more profits by opening the floodgates to unregulated, untraceable and illegal alcohol.

As we see in the U.K., we would pay too high a price.

*State Rep. Bert Johnson serves the 5th House Legislative District, comprised of northeastern Detroit, Highland Park and Hamtramck, and is the chairman of the Regulatory Reform Committee.*