

Regents approve alcohol sales at Nebraska football, volleyball games

Written by Chris Dunker

KEARNEY — Husker fans may loathe their Big Ten neighbors to the east, but the University of Iowa's success in introducing alcohol sales at Hawkeye football games demonstrated the same could be done in Lincoln.

On Friday, citing research showing binge drinking declined among Iowa fans when the taps were turned on in Kinnick Stadium, the University of Nebraska Board of Regents approved the sale of beer, wine and liquor at Husker football and volleyball games.

Regents approved the measure, which replaces a previous policy requiring venues to gain individual approval, on a 7-1 vote at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

"We have shown that our athletic departments can do this in a safe, responsible way," NU President Jeff Gold said.

NU's president, who previously served as the chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, which has allowed beer sales at Maverick hockey games since 2015, said the university would deploy best practices when alcohol sales begin at Husker games next year.

Several regents also spoke in favor of the change, which drew opposition from individuals who spoke during the public comment portion of Friday's meeting, saying it was time for NU to join other major universities that provide alcohol as a fan amenity.

Regent Jim Scheer of Norfolk acknowledged the concerns raised by some that allowing for Husker fans to buy a beer at the concession stand would degrade the experience of others but said that had not come to pass at other universities.

"You can be opposed, but you should also be aware that there is other information out there that some of the assumptions that we all went to initially just doesn't hold up under the scrutiny of actual statistics," Scheer said.

At Iowa, researchers compared alcohol-related behavior in the stadium between 2019 and 2021, when Iowa first started selling alcohol at Hawkeye football games. They found "a significant decrease" in the number of alcohol-related medical emergencies between the two seasons.

The number of police responses in Kinnick Stadium related to alcohol-related offenses also dropped, which mirrors the experiences of other universities in the Big Ten.

While there were some complaints about intoxicated fans registered in the report, most respondents to a survey put to Hawkeye fans did not notice any difference in their gameday experience.

Lincoln Regent Tim Clare, who is NU's representative on the Joint Public Agency overseeing Pinnacle Bank Arena, where the Husker men's and women's basketball teams play, said there were concerns that problems would start after the sale of beer at the arena last year.

Those never materialized, Clare said, due in part to a safety plan that results in steep penalties for anyone at the center of an alcohol-related incident. Clare said Friday he believes that an

appropriate safety plan put in place at Memorial Stadium and the Devaney Center would have a similar effect.

UNL Student Regent Elizabeth Herbin said the measure had the backing of the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska — the student government — which passed a resolution supporting the policy change.

Herbin said many student leaders were encouraged by Husker Athletics offering a portion of the proceeds to support alcohol and binge-drinking education programs on campus.

But Regent Kathy Wilmot of Beaver City, the lone dissenting vote, said she believed alcohol sales would have a negative impact on Husker events — as well as other university sports — moving forward.

“We’re overlooking the fact that these are family events,” Wilmot said. “We’re setting examples, we’re putting things out there we say we often want to protect our children from.

“I feel like we’re selling our soul,” she added.

Wilmot was joined by a handful of individuals who asked regents to vote down the policy change earlier in Friday’s meeting.

Lynette Richards, project coordinator for the Monument Prevention Coalition in Scottsbluff, said Memorial Stadium’s status as the only football stadium in the Big Ten where alcohol sales are not available should continue.

“Is the University of Nebraska a leader or a follower?” Richards said. “I would like to think Nebraska would be a leader and continue to keep alcohol out of these events as a university.”

Wes Wilmot — Regent Wilmot’s husband — said Nebraska had managed to rack up 400 consecutive sellouts at Memorial Stadium and become a self-sufficient athletic department without alcohol being available in the stadium.

“I would ask that you would all put this matter aside and remember what you told the people who elected you and sent you here,” he said. “They trusted you and trusted your decision-making abilities. Just go back to that.”

The executive director of Project Extra Mile, a coalition seeking to reduce alcohol-related incidents in Nebraska, said making alcohol available in more places would result in more binge drinking and youths obtaining alcohol, as well as impaired driving.

“I can tell you with absolute certainty that allowing alcohol sales at sporting events has not and will not reduce this behavior, nor will any education program that you choose to fund,” Chris Wagner said.

“The only things that work to prevent underage drinking and binge drinking are evidence-based policies like not selling alcohol in these venues paired with adequate enforcement of our liquor laws,” he added.

With the approval, regents have now put NU on track to join the rest of the Big Ten Conference in allowing for the sale of alcohol at football games.

Memorial Stadium is the only venue in the 18-team conference where fans cannot consume beer or other alcoholic drinks inside the stadium.

The University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin turned on the taps at their stadiums this year, while Northwestern University is planning alcohol sales at its new stadium.

In an interview last week, Husker Athletic Director Troy Dannen said the sale of alcohol at Memorial Stadium could move forward independent of a proposed \$450 million renovation of the century-old facility.

Instead, he said NU would include the sale of alcohol and the infrastructure to support it in its contract with a new caterer, which could be selected by the end of the year.

"We don't need to redo the stadium to do this," Dannen said. "We can retrofit things to get by."

During Friday's discussion, Dannen said NU planned to conduct "a holistic safety evaluation" at Memorial Stadium following the end of the season to study how alcohol sales could be incorporated into the gameday experience next year.

Among the items Dannen said he anticipated looking at is the policy allowing Husker fans to leave the stadium at halftime — some to tailgates in neighboring parking lots where alcohol can be consumed — and return before the start of the fourth quarter.

Dannen also said Nebraska, as the last university to start alcohol sales at its football games, has the advantage of learning from other universities — including Iowa.

"The advantage of 17 schools in the Big Ten doing this already is there are best practices," Dannen said. "We know what works, we know what doesn't work."

"I would trust that we're going to take care of business," he added.