



# A Beverage Biz Look Ahead at the 2023 Legislative Session

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I've been writing this Maryland state legislative preview article each year at this time for more than a decade now. And this is the first time since 2019 where the annual feature won't be so mired down in pandemic-era hand wringing. For Annapolis and the beverage industry, it's been back to business . . . eh, almost as usual. Thankfully, so is this look ahead to the next General Assembly session.

But first a look back at the past year and its wins. No victory was bigger than the defeat of a bill to allow supermarkets and convenience

stores to put beer and wine on their shelves. Attorney and Maryland State Licensed Beverage Association (MSLBA) lobbyist J. Steven "Steve" Wise was happy for the win. But he warned, "It's a perennial issue, and it does not seem that the supermarkets intend to give up. So, we'll keep fighting."

MSLBA Legislative co-Chairman Jack Milani shared Wise's caution, adding, "Defeating the chain store bill was a big victory. That was probably of the most interest to our members. It's different how they come at us from year to year, and it's been fairly aggressive the last couple of

sessions."

Another big triumph was getting legislation passed that hiked lottery commissions, something Wise believes will be "a huge benefit to a lot of our members who are lottery retailers." Milani concurred, "We had been working on that for a while, and that came to fruition finally. We got a half-percent increase for lottery sales. There are a little over 4,000 agents in the state. So, that affects a lot of folks. The increase takes us from 5.5 percent to 6 percent. So, that was a really good thing."

Both men agreed that it has been



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**J. Steven 'Steve' Wise, MSLBA lobbyist**

good to gradually get back to "pressing the flesh" and taking concerns to legislators face to face as opposed to COVID-era Zoom sessions, e-mails, and phone calls. There was still a fair amount of limitation in this regard during the last session. Too many virtual meetings, Wise and Milani both lamented.

But Wise is ever hopeful. "This year," he said, "it seems like there is going to be much more of an effort to get back to the way things used to be. I, for one, am a big fan of 'in-person.' It allows me to be in the halls of the Legislature, and you pick up an immense amount of information just hanging around. I also enjoy one-on-one conversations with legislators. It's just not the same virtually, even if it's a one-on-one Zoom session."

Such "face-to-faces" are going to be even more important with the election recently concluded and so many new legislators for Wise, Milani, and MSLBA's membership to get to know. "Some faces moved from the House to the Senate, too," Milani noted. "So, this is a good time for our members to reach out to their delegates and senators, introduce themselves, invite them to their stores, and let them know what we are all about. It's critical that you know your elected officials, especially with all of the things that can come up with respect to our businesses. Let them know how many people you employ, how long you've been at your current location, what you do in the community. Hopefully, your elected official will then reach out and talk to you before he or she

votes or takes action on anything industry related. Oh, and let them know that most times, the big guys are not nearly as invested in the community as the small guys!"

Wise says it helps with his job that most lawmakers have some passing familiarity with the alcohol business. After all, most have had a glass of wine with dinner, a beer with buddies, or a visit to their local packaged goods store for supplies. However, he pointed out, "Most of the time, they are just an end user. A consumer. So, when you are talking about how the industry actually works -- the delivery system, taxation, the concentration of retail stores-- they don't think about those parts of it. So, while they are familiar with the product, until they have been in the Legislature a little

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### **Jack Milani, MSLBA Legislative Chairman**

while, they are generally not as familiar with the regulatory aspects of it."

He added, "We've been lucky sometimes. Throughout my 25 or so years, we've had legislators who have owned packaged goods stores, bars, restaurants. They bring with them an immense amount of knowledge. But out of 188 legislators, at any one time you might have had two or three of those individuals. . . . The retailers around the state have to make it a priority to get to know their legislators, especially if they are new. So that when they consider things that affect our industry, they are putting it in the perspective of the businesses in their district when they vote. It's a constant effort and more so after an election."

As for 2023, a supermarket bill al-

most certainly will come up again. Wise believes relief mechanisms that were put in place during COVID that are due to sunset will certainly be discussed. Milani added, "Third-party delivery will be an issue that will certainly be discussed in 2023. Some of the delivery platforms and delivery companies want to get into delivering alcohol. So, expect a lot of talk about that in this session. We think the sale needs to be done by a retailer."

Finally, another issue that will be paramount is keeping MSLBA's membership strong and active. Milani concluded, "Anyone new to the business reading this article, you have to become members and get involved in MSLBA! We have a legislative committee that meets weekly dur-

ing the session. We track all of the bills having to do with employment, taxes, anything that can impact our business that we can weigh in when appropriate. If nothing else, being a member of MSLBA will get you the newsletters and keep you up to date. There's also a lot of knowledge in the room. So, if you are new and have any questions that are business-related, a lot of the older members will try and help you. We were all new once and went through it. So, come and pick up some knowledge and be aware that we're all in the same boat. We're all trying to make a living and take care of our families. If we work together and stay together on the issues, we have a much better shot at being successful." ■



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