

Problem/Minors were able to buy alcohol 50 percent of the time

► From A-1

store owner Sarbjit Singh and his son, Harmanjit, who made the \$10 sale.

"You sold some alcohol to a minor I sent in here," the officer says, setting the cold drinks down on a countertop in front of the startled merchant. "Understand? You've got to check the ID."

Singh will get a chance to tell his side of the story, but not to a judge. He will appear before a Green Bay City Council committee that has a hand in controlling liquor licenses throughout the city.

In a new approach to combating underage drinking, Green Bay has stopped ticketing careless merchants and has started hauling them in front of political leaders for what officials hope will be a frank and honest discussion about a serious community issue.

"We just know that we have to do something different," police Lt. Bill Bongle said. "What we've been doing isn't working very well."

Since starting a new round of unannounced compliance checks last month, police have found that their undercover minors have been able to purchase alcoholic beverages about 50 percent of the time.

Merchants appearing later before the Protection & Welfare

Committee have been apologetic, promising to be more vigilant about checking ID's for liquor sales.

In the past, such business owners would be issued municipal ordinance citations and, if convicted, fined about \$500.

The experiment in collaboration over prosecution is drawing praise from merchants and city officials.

Alderman Chris Wery, chairman of the Protection & Welfare Committee, said grilling those caught in the undercover stings has helped City Council members understand why underage drinking continues to be a problem in Green Bay.

When issuing liquor licenses in the future, Wery said, the city could require tougher controls, such as cash registers that will not process a sale until a date-of-birth has been entered. Such measures could reduce underage access to liquor, Wery said.

"If we can work together toward that, that's the way we want it," he said.

Terry Cayemberg, owner of Terry's EZ Go, 401 Mather St., said he has struggled to make sure employees take underage liquor sales seriously.

Cayemberg appeared before aldermen last month and assured them that he would fire any employee who sells to a



A minor carries a 12-pack of beer as he leaves the Mason Brothers Red Owl Store during an undercover sting Tuesday in Green Bay. **Evan Siegle/Press-Gazette**

minor.

Cayemberg called the city's new approach on the issue encouraging and said he hopes it will continue.

"They're legitimately trying to fix the problem," he said. "You've got to give them credit for trying."

It is not the first time that Green Bay police have sent undercover minors into retail stores, taverns and other businesses to check for underage liquor sales.

But no such operations had been conducted for more than a year, Bongle said, when the police department received a \$10,000 grant from the state Department of Transportation. The undercover program began

in May, with officers accompanying underage operatives on visits to businesses throughout the city.

The underage customers do not use fake ID's, but they do not volunteer an ID unless requested.

If a business turns the minor away without any booze, officers head inside to offer congratulations and a green card that declares the establishment passed the test. If the minor is able to make a purchase, the business owner gets a red "failed" card — and a date with the Protection & Welfare Committee.

Skipping out on the meeting with aldermen would get the merchant a conventional citation in

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Municipal Court. Bongle, however, said merchants have responded well, and nobody has blown off their meeting at City Hall.

"People are really being woken up by this," he said.

Mervin Mason, owner of Mason Brothers Red Owl Store, 923 Ninth St., threw up his hands in surprise when a police officer walked into the store and told Mason he had just sold a 12-pack of Budweiser Light beer to a minor.

It was an extremely busy night in the store, Mason said, and he did not look carefully at the young man's ID.

The business owner later expressed embarrassment about the incident and said he would not make any excuses for himself.

"I should know better," he said.

Another merchant, Thomas Matuszak, said he was pleased to see aldermen taking a more hands-on approach to un-

derage drinking.

Matuszak was summoned before the Protection & Welfare Committee recently for violations at both his stores — Walnut One Stop, 515 W. Walnut St., and Little Store, 2030 University Ave. In both instances, he blamed the problem on complacent employees.

Matuszak later said he is unsure what the city could do to stop such slip-ups.

But he applauded the new program.

"It's important for the city to know it's not an exact science," he said. "Everybody makes mistakes."