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## Lower drinking age debated

*By Adam Silverman, Free Press Staff Writer*

COLCHESTER — College students, educators, law enforcement and members of the public offered mixed opinions at a forum Wednesday night about whether the drinking age should be lowered from 21 to 18.

Argued some: If 18-year-olds can vote, enter into contracts and fight and die for their country, why shouldn't they be able to purchase and consume alcohol legally? Why does the unsuccessful strategy of the Prohibition era continue, confined now to an age group considered in nearly all other respects to be full adults?

Countered others: If overall alcohol-related traffic fatalities have declined since the passage of laws in the early 1980s raising the drinking age to 21, why should policymakers subject America's youths to so risky an experiment? Why should leaders alter such an effective tool?

The discussion rang out before a crowd of about 200 people, mostly young adults, who filled an auditorium at St. Michael's College in Colchester. Among the panelists was John McCardell, a former president of Middlebury College who founded and directs Choose Responsibility, an organization that advocates allowing states to lower the drinking age as long as they provide alcohol education, licensing and other requirements.

"If we want to take drunks off the roads, a drinking age is not the way to do that," McCardell said. "All we do is drive the proscribed behavior from public places and public view." That leads to irresponsible and life-threatening consumption such as binge drinking, an ongoing problem among college students, he said.

Last month the presidents of 100 prominent U.S. colleges and universities joined McCardell in asking legislators to consider lowering the drinking age. McCardell said one goal of the proposal — which he told students is "one of the more significant public-policy debates of your time, and of our time" — was to spark discussions like Wednesday's.

McCardell hopes to encourage Congress to allow states to set their own drinking ages, as they once did, without fear of losing a percentage of critical federal highway funding. Federal law does not set a drinking age; rather, Congress established and maintains the guideline through the power of the purse.

Panelist John Flannigan, a lieutenant with the Vermont State Police and commander of its Traffic Safety Unit, said lowering the drinking age would cause a corresponding increase in alcohol-related deaths, injuries, academic failure and health-care costs.

"Lowering the drinking age I don't believe is the answer," Flannigan said. "It would undermine the progress that we've made over the last 20-plus years."

McCardell argued the decline in alcohol-related traffic deaths since the raising of the drinking age has affected every demographic, not just those 18 to 21, and other factors, such as seat-belt use and the prevalence of air bags likely is more responsible. But Flannigan said New Zealand lowered its drinking age in 1999 and saw crashes increase dramatically.

“We can learn from others and not make the same mistakes,” Flannigan said.

Students who spoke during a question-and-answer session appeared to favor lowering the age. One man asked whether the country has a “moral responsibility” to allow younger-than-21 military veterans to drink; a woman wondered whether a reduced age could curb the novelty of illegal drinking and therefore reduce binge consumption.

Attendee Herb Sinkinson didn’t make it to a microphone in time to voice his opposition to changing the status quo. Sinkinson, a community resource officer and 20-year employee of the state Probation and Parole Office, said there’s too much risk.

“The brain is still developing, so the earlier they start using substances, the more likely it is that people will develop addictions,” he said. “You’re going to have the 18-year-olds buying for the 14, 13, 12-year-olds. That is a really scary thought.”

St. Michael’s student Kate Mooney, 21, of Gray, Maine, said she’s comfortable with the current drinking age but glad to hear leaders debate openly on a college campus.

“It’s really great to see adults discuss the issue and not lecture down to us,” she said.

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