

## Parents warned: Keep teens sober

By GREG SMITH

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NORWICH -- A revised underage drinking law may force parents to think twice before serving alcohol to minors in their homes.

A law that took effect Sunday closes a loophole that had prevented police from interfering with underage drinking parties on private property, according to Geralyn Laut, consultant for the Connecticut Coalition to Stop Underage Drinking.

Laut joined a panel discussion Wednesday, "Parents Who Host, Lose the Most," sponsored by the Norwich Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition at Norwich Free Academy.

Under the former law, minors were prohibited from possessing alcohol in public places, but not on private property, allowing anyone to host an underage drinking party, regardless of whether the host was a parent.

"It's a step in the right direction," Norwich Police Lt. Timothy Menard said about the law. "But the penalty minimizes the potential harm of allowing a minor to drink."

Parents, or minors hosting a party while their parents are away, face an infraction for their first offense of the new law, a ticket comparable to running a stop sign.

A second offense is a misdemeanor charge and a maximum one year in prison. Parties with underage drinkers and parents present also can lead to felony charges if someone is injured, as well as civil penalties.

The law is less about the fines, Laut said, and more of a push for people to talk about the problem of underage drinking.

Organizers were disappointed with the sparse attendance Wednesday. The audience included several members of a burgeoning Students Against Destructive Decisions group at NFA.

SADD member Amanda Bachand, 17, said she remembered at a friend's Sweet 16 party "her mom got her a 30-pack of beer."

Bachand's group received some ideas for non-alcoholic fun from attorney Donald Beebe, a member of the panel.

Beebe, a ventriloquist and trial lawyer who practices criminal liability and personal injury in Norwich, runs a 4-H teen program he said is strict about its alcohol policies.

He told students they need to come up with some innovative ideas if they want students to come to non-alcoholic events. Beebe brought a box of novelties, putting on an elephant mask to demonstrate his point.

"There's this whole notion in society that you can't have fun without being inebriated," Beebe said. "That's ridiculous."