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## Mill Valley takes an important step

Staff Report

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WE WERE pleased that Mill Valley's City Council unanimously approved a social host ordinance this week.

The county and a majority of Marin's cities and towns now have passed such laws, which target adults who allow teen drinking parties - including property owners whose homes are used for the illegal, but popular, events.

Mill Valley's ordinance is similar to the county's and ones in Novato, San Rafael, San Anselmo, Fairfax and Tiburon. The ordinance in Marin's third-largest city takes effect in March. A first offense carries a \$750 fine; a second is \$850 and it is \$1,000 for a third.

About a dozen people spoke in favor of the new law Tuesday night. No one spoke in opposition.

Corte Madera, Larkspur, Sausalito, Ross and Belvedere need to move quickly and adopt social host ordinances. Teen drinking is an epidemic in Marin and social host laws are one way that the county can send a unified message that every city and town will not tolerate adults helping teens hold drinking parties.

But these laws, while an important law enforcement tool - they have been used numerous times since two Novato teens died in a crash after a large underage party in 2005 - are crucial for other reasons. They stimulate public discussion of an issue that is deeply rooted in our county's popular culture.

Mill Valley Councilman Ken Wachtel put it well Tuesday night when he said the ordinance "will start a conversation and that is as important as the ordinance itself."

He is right. Each time a city discusses and passes a social host law, there is an opportunity for much-needed public conversation.

But every time a local social host law is enforced in Marin - every time a parent or other adult is arrested or cited and fined - the news sends ripples through that neighborhood, that city, all those networks of friends and families. The issue of teen drinking and these laws no longer are abstractions. These laws no longer are merely symbolic.

That is why the fines and other penalties need to be substantial for behavior that we as a society simply cannot tolerate. Stiff drunken-driving penalties are a good example. Too many people still drink and drive, but everyone is aware of the high price for that behavior, which makes more of us think twice - and talk about the risks. Such cultural changes take time, but they are worth the effort - especially when it comes to protecting our children and helping them navigate the often dangerous journey to adulthood.

Congratulations, Mill Valley. And keep that dialogue going.

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