

# Prosecutor, sheriff tackle underage drinking issues at forum

4/30/05  
Saturday  
(Frog)

By RYAN SMITH  
News Tribune

WARDSVILLE — With prom at Blair Oaks High School one day away, underage drinking was the focus of a Friday forum that allowed residents to ask questions of Cole County Prosecutor Bill Tackett and Sheriff Greg White.

Many of the questions asked by the approximately 30 people attending the forum at the Wardsville Lions Club, including a dozen high school students, involved the issue of alcohol.

One teenager asked why the county chose to focus on underage drinking so much.

"I've talked to a lot of people and it seems to be the number one issue in the community," said Tackett. "I think I'm responding to what the community wants."

White said underage drinking "is an issue because it is valid and real. There is a direct correlation between promiscuity, STDs and alcohol consumption."

White said his department checks on parties when they hear



Cole County Prosecutor Bill Tackett and Sheriff Greg White answer questions from the audience, including several many Blair Oaks High School students, about the proposed changes in the reporting of underage drinking offenses during a forum held Friday at the Wardsville Lions Club.  
Stephen Brooks/News Tribune

reports or rumors of them around the county because "prevention is always the best method. We're trying to protect you."

Tackett and White also discussed a bill currently in the legislature that has several deterrents to teenage drinking, including the possibility of teens losing their driver's licenses or being excluded from specific extra-curricular activities at school for students who drink on, or off, school property.

Tackett said he likes the part of the bill that holds parents responsible for parties where minors are consuming alcohol.

"People have asked me, 'What do you do with a parent who opens up their house for these kids who start drinking?'"

"If this is passed, they'll have to pay the piper. It holds those parents liable," Tackett said.

Sister Ann Boessen expressed her concerns with young people and how to help them focus on something other than alcohol.

"We always just used to make more rules and regulations and that's not always the answer. We have to help the kids love themselves," said Boessen.

The hour long forum was the

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first in what Tackett hopes to be a regular occurrence in small towns in Cole County. There are initial plans to set up similar forums every couple of weeks — next in Taos, Centertown and Russellville.

Blair Oaks Superintendent Jim Jones said he was glad to see Tackett and White "taking a proactive approach," to dealing with issues like underage drinking.

Jones released several students from Blair Oaks so they could go to the forum and ask questions.

"These students our the future of Cole County and our country," he said, "and I think it's important for them to come and listen."