

**BEFORE THE ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL APPEALS BOARD  
OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA**

**AB-9631**

File: 20-401759; Reg: 16084403

7-ELEVEN, INC. and SSS ATWAL, INC.,  
dba 7-Eleven Store #2174-19988F  
1621 North Placentia Avenue, Fullerton, CA 92831,  
Appellants/Licensees

v.

DEPARTMENT OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL,  
Respondent

Administrative Law Judge at the Dept. Hearing: Doris Huebel

Appeals Board Hearing: February 1, 2018  
Los Angeles, CA

**ISSUED FEBRUARY 26, 2018**

*Appearances:*        *Appellants:* Donna J. Hooper, of Solomon, Saltsman & Jamieson,  
as counsel for 7-Eleven, Inc. and SSS Atwal, Inc.,

*Respondent:* Kerry K. Winters, as counsel for Department of  
Alcoholic Beverage Control.

**OPINION**

7-Eleven, Inc. and SSS Atwal, Inc., doing business as 7-Eleven Store #2174-19988F, appeal from a decision of the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control<sup>1</sup> suspending their license for 10 days (with all 10 days stayed for a period of one year provided no further cause for discipline occurs during that time) because their clerk sold an alcoholic beverage to a police minor decoy, in violation of Business and Professions Code section 25658, subdivision (a).

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<sup>1</sup>The decision of the Department, dated January 12, 2017, is set forth in the appendix.

## FACTS AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Appellants' off-sale beer and wine license was issued on September 3, 2003. On June 27, 2016, the Department filed an accusation against appellants charging that, on January 6, 2016, appellants' clerk, Muhammad Talha (the clerk), sold an alcoholic beverage to 19-year-old Natali Flores. Although not noted in the accusation, Flores was working as a minor decoy for the Fullerton Police Department at the time.

Appellants filed and served on the Department a Special Notice of Defense pursuant to Government Code section 11506, as well as a Request for Discovery pursuant to Government Code section 11507.6, demanding, inter alia, the names and addresses of all witnesses. The Department responded by providing the address and phone number of the Fullerton Police Department in lieu of the decoy's personal contact information. Thereafter, appellants filed a Motion to Compel Discovery. The motion was opposed by the Department, and it was denied by the ALJ.

At administrative hearings held on October 11, and November 8, 2016, documentary evidence was received and testimony concerning the sale was presented by Flores (the decoy), by Department Agent Bryan Rushing, and by co-licensee Rajwinder Atwal, president of SSS Atwal, Inc.

Testimony established that on January 6, 2016, Officer Crabtree entered the licensed premises in plainclothes, followed shortly thereafter by the decoy. The decoy went to the coolers where she selected a three-pack of 25-ounce Bud Light beer in cans. She took the beer to the front counter and set it down. The clerk scanned the beer and asked for her identification. The decoy handed the clerk her California driver's license, which has a vertical orientation, shows her correct date of birth, and contains a red stripe indicating "AGE 21 IN 2017." (Exh. 2.) The clerk looked at the ID, swiped it

in the register, looked at it again, then completed the sale without asking any age-related questions. Officer Crabtree witnessed the sale from inside the store. He and the decoy exited the premises separately.

Officer Crabtree re-entered the premises with the decoy as well as a second decoy, Alexa Elkabarra, Department Agent Bryan Rushing, and Corporeal O'Neil of the Fullerton Police Department. The violation was explained to the clerk, a face-to-face identification of the clerk was made by the decoy, and a citation was issued to the clerk. The clerk's employment was subsequently terminated.

The second decoy did not participate in the face-to-face identification—decoy Flores testified that decoy Elkabarra came into the store with them only so she would not be left in the car alone. Counsel for appellants was unaware of a second decoy's existence until the October 11, 2016 hearing, so a continuance was granted to allow for additional discovery. Nevertheless, decoy Elkabarra did not appear at the November 8, 2016 continuance. Her presence is not an issue in this appeal.

On November 11, 2016, the administrative law judge (ALJ) submitted a proposed decision, sustaining the accusation and suspending the license for a period of 10 days, with all 10 days stayed for a period of one year, dependent upon discipline-free operation during that time. Thereafter, the Department's Administrative Hearing Office sent a letter from its Chief ALJ to both appellants and Department counsel, inviting the submission of comments on the proposed decision, and stating that the proposed decision and any comments submitted will be submitted to the Director of ABC in 14 days.

Appellants submitted comments to the Director, arguing that neither the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) nor the ABC Act authorize the Department to

permit the parties in a disciplinary procedure to comment on a proposed decision, and that by requesting submission of these comments, the Department exceeded the authority granted to it by the APA. The Department did not submit comments.

On January 12, 2017, the Department issued its Certificate of Decision, adopting the proposed decision in its entirety.

Appellants then filed a timely appeal contending: (1) the ALJ erred in denying appellants' motion to compel disclosure of the decoys' addresses, and (2) the Department's commenting procedure violates the Administrative Procedures Act (APA).

## DISCUSSION

### I

Appellants contend that the ALJ abused her discretion by denying appellants' motion to compel disclosure of the decoy's contact information. Appellants also contend the Department failed to comply with Government Code section 11507.6 when it provided only the address of the Fullerton Police Department when it was in possession of the primary decoy's personal contact information, and when it failed to provide the name and address of the second decoy prior to the first day of hearing.

This issue has been raised and argued in innumerable cases before this Board, and the Board has consistently found that appellants are not entitled to a decoy's personal contact information. As the Board held in 1999:

Government Code §11507.6 entitles a party to an address for a witness. The statute does not say it must be a residential address. . . . We think any requirement that a decoy's home address be disclosed must be conditioned upon a showing that the address itself has a material connection to the issues, and not simply as a means of contacting the decoy.

(*In re Mauri* (1999) AB-7276, at p. 8.)

In *7-Eleven, Inc./Joe* (2016) AB-9544<sup>2</sup> the Board further held that the decoy's personal address is protected under section 832.7 of the Penal Code. (*Id.* at pp. 6-10.) We are not persuaded by appellants' attempt during oral argument to characterize the Department's protection of decoys as "bending the law," and reject that characterization entirely. We reiterate our confidence in the *Joe* decision—and the correctness of protecting the decoy's personal information under section 832.7—and refer the parties to that case for an in-depth discussion.

Furthermore, having had our opinion on this matter affirmed by the Court of Appeals,<sup>3</sup> albeit by way of an unpublished decision, we consider this issue moot until and unless we are instructed otherwise by a higher court.

## II

Appellants contend that the Department's commenting procedure violates the APA because it is contrary to the intent of the legislature, is an underground regulation, and encourages illegal ex parte communications.

The APA defines the term "regulation" broadly: "Regulation' means every rule, regulation, order, or standard of general application or the amendment, supplement, or revision of any rule, regulation, order, or standard adopted by any state agency to implement, interpret, or make specific the law enforced or administered by it, or to govern its procedure." (Gov. Code, § 11342.600.) "[I]f it looks like a regulation, reads

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<sup>2</sup>Cert. den., *7-Eleven, Inc. et al v. ABC Appeals Bd.* (July 6, 2016) 2<sup>nd</sup> App. Dist. B275900.

<sup>3</sup>On November 22, 2017, the Second District Court of Appeals filed an unpublished decision affirming the Board's decision in *7-Eleven/Holmes* (2016) AB-9554 on this issue. Since unpublished decisions cannot be cited we are not permitted to quote the decision here, nor cite it as authority.

like a regulation, and acts like a regulation, it will be treated as a regulation whether or not the agency in question so labeled it.” (*State Water Resources Control Bd. v. Office of Admin. Law* (1993) 12 Cal.App.4th 697, 702 [16 Cal.Rptr.2d 25].)

The APA requires that all regulations be adopted through the formal rulemaking process.

No state agency shall issue, utilize, enforce, or attempt to enforce any guideline, criterion, bulletin, manual, instruction, order, standard of general application, or other rule, which is a regulation, as defined in Section 11342.600, unless the guideline, criterion, bulletin, manual, instruction, order, standard of general application, or other rule has been adopted as a regulation and filed with the Secretary of State pursuant to this chapter.

(Gov. Code, § 11340.5(a).) All regulations are subject to the APA rulemaking process unless expressly exempted by statute. (Gov. Code, § 11346; *Engelmann v. State Bd. of Education* (1991) 2 Cal.App.4th 47, 59 [3 Cal.Rptr.2d 264].) Compliance with the rulemaking process is mandatory; where a regulation was not properly adopted, it has no legal effect. (*Armistead v. State Personnel Bd.* (1978) 22 Cal.3d 198, 204-205 [149 Cal.Rptr. 1].)

A regulation is exempt if it “relates only to the internal management of the state agency.” (Gov. Code, § 11340.9(d).) This exception, however, is narrow. (See *Armistead, supra*; *Stoneham v. Rushen* (1982) 137 Cal.App.3d 729, 736 [188 Cal.Rptr. 130].) “Where the challenged policy goes beyond merely prioritizing or allocating internal resources and may significantly affect others outside the agency . . . such a policy goes beyond the agency’s internal management and is subject to adoption as a regulation under the APA.” (*Center for Biological Diversity v. Dept. of Fish & Wildlife* (2015) 234 Cal.App.4th 214, 262 [183 Cal.Rptr.3d 736]; see also *Stoneham, supra*, at p. 736 [inmate classification scheme was rule of general application significantly

affecting male prison population].)

In *Tidewater*, the California Supreme Court outlined a two-part test:

A regulation subject to the APA thus has two principal identifying characteristics. [Citation.] First, the agency must intend its rule to apply generally, rather than in a specific case. The rule need not, however, apply universally; a rule applies generally so long as it declares how a certain class of cases will be decided. [Citation.] Second, the rule must “implement, interpret, or make specific the law enforced or administered by [the agency], or . . . govern [the agency’s] procedure.” (Gov. Code, §11342, subd. (g).)

(*Tidewater Marine Western, Inc. v. Bradshaw* (1996) 14 Cal.4th 557, 571 [59 Cal.Rptr.2d 186].)

While much of the Department’s General Order number 2016-02, issued on February 17, 2016 and entitled *Ex Parte and Decision Review* (hereinafter, General Order) merely regulates internal case management procedures, certain provisions affect the due process rights of licensees. In particular, section 3, paragraphs 5 and 6 introduce the new comment procedure, which occurs before the Department Director in his or her decision making capacity:

5. Upon receipt of a proposed decision from an Administrative Law Judge, AHO [the Administrative Hearing Office] shall forward a copy of the proposed decision to each of the parties, including OLS [the Office of Legal Services] and the Director via the Administrative Records Secretary. In addition, AHO shall include a notification that the parties may submit comments regarding the proposed decision for the Director’s consideration, that comments must be mailed to the Administrative Records Secretary, and that the Director will withhold any action on the matter for fourteen days from the date the proposed decision is mailed to the parties. Upon the written agreement of the parties, the Director may act on the proposed decision prior to the expiration of the fourteen-day withhold period.

6. The Administrative Records Secretary shall forward only the proposed decision and comments submitted by the parties to the Director on the 15th day after mailing of the proposed decision by AHO. Comments received after the 14th day will be forwarded immediately to the Director.

(General Order #1016-02, § 3, ¶¶ 5-6.)

Only appellants submitted comments on the proposed decision to the Director. In their respective briefs, the parties agree that the comments did not alter the outcome of the case, but disagree on whether the outcome is relevant.

Under the *Tidewater* test, the Department’s General Order—in particular, the two paragraphs at issue here—constitutes an unenforceable underground regulation. First, the General Order itself expresses an intent that it will apply generally. It states: “Although the procedures described herein are intended to apply to all cases, this policy is not intended to provide parties with any substantive rights.” (General Order, *supra*, at § 2.) It orders general compliance with its terms, including paragraphs 5 and 6: “Effective immediately, the following protocols shall be followed with respect to matters litigated before the Administrative Hearing Office.” (*Id.* at § 3.) The general applicability is therefore obvious on the face of the General Order itself.

While the General Order’s subsequent language attempts to minimize its general applicability, those statements are either manifestly misleading, or merely incorporate an element of agency discretion; they do not negate its general applicability. For example, the disclaimer that “this policy is not intended to provide parties with any substantive rights” (*ibid.*) is misleading because the General Order itself necessarily affects the parties’ substantive due process hearing rights under the APA by creating a new, non-statutory level of informal written argument before the Department Director. (See generally Gov. Code, § 11425.10 *et seq.*) Regardless, the General Order need not create substantive rights in order to constitute a regulation subject to the APA. (See Gov. Code, § 11342.600.)

Moreover, a regulation is not exempt from the rulemaking process simply



because it entails an element of agency discretion. The General Order states that “[w]here deviation is necessary or warranted in particular situations, such deviation shall not be considered a violation of this policy.” (General Order, *supra*, at § 2.) This is pure discretion; there is no explanation of what these “particular situations” might be. Licensees—a class affected by the General Order—cannot control or predict whether the Department will apply the General Order to their case or instead ignore it. According to the terms of the General Order, they presumably have no substantive right to appeal the Department’s exercise of discretion. (See *ibid.* [“[T]his policy is not intended to provide parties with any substantive rights”].) Until the Department chooses to inform them otherwise, licensees must simply assume that the terms of the General Order will apply to their disciplinary proceedings and prepare accordingly. The General Order applies generally, and therefore satisfies the first half of the two-part *Tidewater* test.

Paragraphs 5 and 6—as well as other provisions within the General Order—supplement and “make specific” the Department’s post-hearing decision making procedures. (See *id.* at § 3, ¶¶ 5-6; see also Gov. Code, § 11425.10(a)(2) [“The agency shall make available to the person to which the agency action is directed a copy of the governing procedure.”].) As the General Order itself notes, it is “intended to insure that the Department adopts the most efficient and legally compliant protocols for the review of proposed decisions.” (General Order, *supra*, at § 1.) The General Order therefore easily satisfies the second part of the *Tidewater* test.

The Court in *Tidewater* went on to outline several exceptions to the rulemaking requirements, including case-specific adjudications, private advice letters, and restatements or summaries, without commentary, of past case-specific decisions.

(*Tidewater, supra*, at p. 571.) Additionally, as noted above, the legislature may enact individual statutory exceptions. In our opinion, no exception applies.

The General Order is therefore a regulation—under the definition supplied by the Government Code and the Court in *Tidewater*—and its adoption improperly circumvented the APA rulemaking process. It is therefore an underground regulation.

The Department is correct, however, that this conclusion alone does not necessarily merit reversal. (See *Tidewater, supra*, at pp. 576-577.) As the Court observed in *Tidewater*,

If, when we agreed with an agency's application of a controlling law, we nevertheless rejected that application simply because the agency failed to comply with the APA [rulemaking procedures], then we would undermine the legal force of the controlling law. Under such a rule, an agency could effectively repeal a controlling law simply by reiterating all its substantive provisions in improperly adopted regulations.

(*Tidewater, supra*, at p. 577.)

The Department maintains the submission of comments pursuant to the General Order did not change the outcome of this case while appellants maintain that it is speculative to assert that the procedure had no effect on the outcome. However, in resolving due process issues surrounding the submission of secret ex parte hearing reports, the *Quintanar* Court rejected the Department's position:

The Department implies no remedy is necessary because any submission was harmless; according to the Department, the decision maker could have inferred the contents of the reports of hearing (to wit, a summary of the hearing and requested penalty) from the record. We are not persuaded. First, because the Department has refused to make copies of the reports of hearing part of the record, despite a Board order that it do so, whether their contents are as innocuous as the Department portrays them to be is impossible to determine. Second, although both sides no doubt would have liked to submit a secret un rebutted review of the hearing to the ultimate decision maker or decision maker's advisors, only one side had that chance. The APA's administrative adjudication bill of rights was designed to eliminate such one-sided occurrences. We will not

countenance them here. Thus, reversal of the Department's orders is required.

(*Dept. of Alcoholic Bev. Control v. Alcoholic Bev. Control Appeals Bd. (Quintanar)* (2006) 40 Cal.4th 1, 17 [50 Cal.Rptr.3d 585].)

If the Department's improper adoption of its General Order were the sole issue, then the Department would be correct; as in *Tidewater*, we would have no grounds for reversal. However, the issue here is also one of due process. Did the Department's comment procedure deprive appellants of any of the due process rights guaranteed by Chapter 4.5 of the APA? If it did, then according to *Quintanar*, the outcome of the case is not relevant.

The APA provides detailed guidance on permissible communications, including post-hearing communications with a decision maker. Generally,

While the proceeding is pending there shall be no communication, direct or indirect, regarding any issue in the proceeding, to the presiding officer from an employee or representative of an agency that is a party or from an interested person outside the agency, without notice and an opportunity for all parties to participate in the communication.

(Gov. Code, § 11430.10(a); see also Law Rev. Com. com, § 11430.10 (1995) [extending applicability to agency heads or others delegated decision-making powers].) Subsequent provisions outline exceptions to this rule, none of which apply here. (See Gov. Code, §§ 11430.20, 11430.30.) Additionally, the APA sets out procedural remedies should a decision maker receive an improper ex parte communication. (Gov. Code, §§ 11430.40; 11430.50.)

The Law Revision Committee comments accompanying section 11430.10, however, allow for communications initiated by the decision maker:

While this section precludes an adversary from communicating with the presiding officer, it does not preclude the presiding officer from

communicating with an adversary. . . . Thus it would not prohibit an agency head from communicating to an adversary that a particular case should be settled or dismissed. However, a presiding officer should give assistance or advice with caution, since there may be an appearance of unfairness if assistance or advice is given to some parties but not others.

(Law. Rev. Com. com., § 11430.10 (1995).) Similarly, the *Quintanar* court suggested the Department's hearing reports might be permissible if they complied with the APA:

The APA bars only advocate-decision maker ex parte contacts, not all contacts. Thus, for example, nothing in the APA precludes the ultimate decision maker from considering posthearing briefs submitted by, and served on, each side. The Department if it so chooses may continue to use the report of hearing procedure, so long as it provides licensees a copy of the report and the opportunity to respond. (Cf. § 11430.50 [contacts with presiding officer or decision maker must be public, and all parties must be afforded opportunity to respond].)

(*Quintanar, supra*, at p. 17.)

While the General Order was unquestionably adopted without regard to APA rulemaking procedures, we cannot say that the comment procedure itself, as applied in this case, violated appellants' APA due process rights. It appears that the Department tailored its comment procedure to the *Quintanar* decision—appellants submitted a post-hearing brief, which was duly served on the Department and included in the administrative record. This is sufficient to satisfy the statutory requirement that all parties receive “notice and an opportunity . . . to participate in the communication.”

(Gov. Code, § 11430.10.)

It is true that the present parties were not given the opportunity to respond to their adversary's post-hearing comments. The “opportunity to respond,” however—opposed to the opportunity “to participate in the communication”—is part of the procedural remedy when the decision maker receives an unsolicited ex parte communication. (See Gov. Code §§ 11430.40, 11430.50 [providing opposing party a

ten-day window, following disclosure, to respond to ex parte communication].) In context, the *Quintanar* Court required the “opportunity to respond” if the Department continued to accept one-sided ex parte hearing reports from its own attorneys. If, as here, the decision maker instead simultaneously offers both parties the opportunity to submit comment, then both parties have had the opportunity to participate in the conversation, and the statutes require no further opportunity for response. (See Gov. Code, §§ 11430.10 through 11430.50.)

We agree with appellants that the Department’s General Order is an underground regulation that was adopted in violation of APA rulemaking requirements. Nevertheless, the General Order’s comment procedure—as applied in the present case—did not impact appellants’ due process rights, and therefore does not merit reversal. The Board will not hesitate to reverse in the future, however, should it be proven that appellants’ due process rights were adversely affected by this comment procedure.

#### ORDER

The decision of the Department is affirmed.<sup>4</sup>

BAXTER RICE, CHAIRMAN  
 PETER J. RODDY, MEMBER  
 JUAN PEDRO GAFFNEY RIVERA, MEMBER  
 ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL  
 APPEALS BOARD

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<sup>4</sup>This final order is filed in accordance with Business and Professions Code section 23088, and shall become effective 30 days following the date of the filing of this order as provided by section 23090.7 of said code.

Any party, before this final order becomes effective, may apply to the appropriate court of appeal, or the California Supreme Court, for a writ of review of this final order in accordance with Business and Professions Code section 23090 et seq.