

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

AB-8507

File: 21-215362 Reg: 05060105

7-ELEVEN, INC. dba 7-Eleven #20174
6571 El Cajon Boulevard, San Diego, CA 92115,
Appellant/Licensee

v.

DEPARTMENT OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL,
Respondent

Administrative Law Judge at the Dept. Hearing: Rodolfo Echeverria

Appeals Board Hearing: November 2, 2006
Los Angeles, CA

Redeliberation: January 11, 2007; February 1, 2007

ISSUED MARCH 27, 2007

7-Eleven, Inc., doing business as 7-Eleven #20174 (appellant), appeals from a decision of the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control¹ which suspended its off-sale general license for 10 days for its clerk having sold a 40-ounce bottle of Budweiser beer to Jonathan Meers, a 19-year-old police minor decoy, a violation of Business and Professions Code section 25658, subdivision (a).

Appearances on appeal include appellant 7-Eleven, Inc., appearing through its counsel, Ralph B. Saltsman, Stephen W. Solomon, and Kevin Snyder, and the Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control, appearing through its counsel, Matthew G. Ainley.

FACTS AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Appellant's off-sale general license was issued on July 3, 1989. The Department

¹The decision of the Department, dated January 12, 2006, is set forth in the appendix.

instituted an accusation against appellant on June 30, 2005, charging the sale of an alcoholic beverage to a minor on February 12, 2005.

An administrative hearing was held on October 18, 2005, at which time oral and documentary evidence was received. The only witness, Jonathan Meers, testified that the clerk asked for and examined his identification (a California driver's license) before proceeding with the sale. Subsequent to the hearing, the Department issued its decision which determined that the charge of the accusation had been established, and which rejected appellant's claim that a defense had been established under Department Rule 141(b)(2).

Appellant thereafter filed a timely notice of appeal, and now contends that the denial of its discovery motion prevented it from preparing a defense.²

DISCUSSION

I

Appellant asserts in its brief that the denial of its pre-hearing Motion to Compel discovery was improper and denied it the opportunity to defend this action. Its motion was brought in response to the Department's failure to comply with those parts of the discovery request that sought "any findings by the Administrative Law Judge or the Department of ABC that the decoy does not appear to be a person reasonable [sic] expected to be under 21 years of age" and all decisions certified by the Department over a four-year period "where there is therein a finding or an effective determination

² Appellant has filed a motion to augment the record by the addition of any Department form 104 which may have been submitted to the Department decision maker, as well as any related documents, contending that the transmission of such an ex parte communication resulted in a due process violation. We address this issue in part II, *infra*.

that the decoy at issue therein did not display the appearance which could generally be expected of a person under 21 years of age under the actual circumstances presented the seller of alcoholic beverages at the time of the alleged offense.”

ALJ Gruen, who heard the motion, denied it because he concluded it would cause the Department an undue burden and consumption of time and because appellant failed to show that the requested items were relevant or would lead to admissible evidence. Appellant argues that the items requested were expressly included as discoverable matters in the Administrative Procedure Act (Gov. Code, § 11340 et seq.) and the ALJ used erroneous standards in denying the motion.

“[T]he exclusive right to and method of discovery as to any proceeding governed by [the APA]” is provided in section 11507.6. (Gov. Code, § 11507.5.) The plain meaning of this is that any right to discovery that appellant may have in an administrative proceeding before the Department must fall within the list of specific items found in Government Code section 11507.6. Appellant asserts that the items requested are discoverable under the provisions of subdivisions (b), (d), and (e) of section 11507.6. Those paragraphs provide that a party "is entitled to . . . inspect and make copies of ..."

¶ . . . ¶

(b) A statement pertaining to the subject matter of the proceeding made by any party to another party or person;

¶ ... ¶

(d) All writings, including, but not limited to, reports of mental, physical and blood examinations and things which the party then proposes to offer in evidence;

(e) Any other writing or thing which is relevant and which would be admissible in evidence;

Appellant argues it is entitled to the materials sought because previous findings of the Department are statements "pertaining to the subject matter of the proceeding"

made by a party; findings made by an ALJ are relevant writings that would be admissible in evidence; and the photographs requested are "writings" that appellant would offer into evidence so the ALJ could compare them to the decoy present at the hearing.

Appellant argues the material requested would help it prepare a defense under rule 141(b)(2) by knowing what criteria have been considered by ALJ's and the Department when deciding that a decoy's appearance violated the rule. It would then be able, it asserts, to compare the appearance of the decoy who purchased alcohol at their premises with the appearance of other decoys who were found not to comply with rule 141(b)(2).

It is conceivable that each decoy who was found not to display the appearance required by the rule had some particular attribute, or combination of attributes, that warranted his or her disqualification. We have considerable doubt, however, that any such attributes, which an ALJ would only be able to examine from a photograph or written description, would be of any assistance in assessing the appearance of a different decoy who is present at the administrative hearing.³

The most important attribute at the time of the sale is probably the decoy's facial countenance, since that is the feature that confronts the clerk more than any other. Yet, in every case it is an ALJ's assessment of a decoy's overall appearance that matters, not simply a focus on some narrow aspect of that appearance.

We know from our own experience that appellant's attorneys represent well over half of all appeals this Board hears. We must assume, therefore, that the vast bulk of

³ In all cases charging sale-to-minor violations the Department must produce the minor involved unless the minor is deceased or too ill to be present, or the minor's presence is waived by the respondent. (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 25666.)

the information it seeks is already in the possession of its attorneys. This, coupled with the questionable assistance this information could provide to an ALJ in assessing the appearance of a decoy present at the hearing, persuades us that ALJ Gruen did not abuse his discretion in denying appellant's motion.

We are unwilling to agree with appellant's contention that the language of Government Code section 11507.6 is broad enough to reach findings and decisions of the Department in past cases. The terms "statements" and "writings" as used in that subdivision cannot reasonably be interpreted to reach any and every finding and decision of the Department. A more reasonable understanding of the terms is that they refer to statements or writings made by any of the parties with respect to the particular subject matter of the proceeding in which the discovery is sought. To interpret the term to include any finding or decision by the Department in previous cases over a period of years which contained an issue similar to the one in the case being litigated would countenance the worst kind of fishing expedition, and would unnecessarily and unduly complicate and protract any proceeding.

Appellant has cited no authority for its contention, and we are unaware of any such authority. Appellant would have this Board afford it the broad discovery that is available in civil cases, well beyond what is authorized by section 11507.6. We are not permitted to do so.

Appellant also contends that the APA allows denial of a motion to compel discovery only in the cases of privileged communications or when the respondent party lacks possession, custody, or control over the material. Therefore, it argues, denying the motion because the request was burdensome, would require an undue consumption of time, was not relevant, and would not lead to admissible evidence, was

clearly in contravention of the APA discovery provisions.

Appellant's contention is based on the false premise stated in its brief:

In the present case, the ALJ denied Appellant's request for discovery on grounds not contemplated by Gov. Code §§ 11507.6 and 11507.7. Those two Government Code Sections provide the "exclusive right to and method of discovery," Govt. Code § 11507.5, and similarly state the objections upon which the Department may argue and an ALJ may rely upon in deciding a Motion to Compel. See Govt. Code §§11507.6 & 11507.7.

This premise is false because it assumes, without any authority, that the two statutes state the sole bases on which a motion to compel may be denied. No such restriction appears in the statutes. The reasons given by the ALJ for denying the motion were well within his authority. Those reasons also provided a reasonable basis for the outright denial of the motion instead of simply limiting the scope of the discovery.

II

Appellants have filed a motion to augment the administrative record with any form 104 (Report of Hearing) included in the Department's file, and have filed a supplemental brief regarding the recent decision of the California Supreme Court in *Dept. of Alcoholic Beverage Control v. Alcoholic Beverage Control Appeals Bd.* (2006) 40 Cal.4th 1 [50 Cal.Rptr. 3d. 585] (*Quintanar*).

The California Supreme Court held in *Quintanar* that the provision of a Report of Hearing by a Department "prosecutor" to the Department's decision maker (or the decision maker's advisors) is a violation of the ex parte communication prohibitions found in the APA. (*Quintanar, supra*, 40 Cal.4th 1.) In *Quintanar*, the Department conceded that a report of hearing was prepared and that the decision maker or the decision maker's advisor had access to the report of hearing, establishing, the court

held, "that the reports of hearing were provided to the agency's decision maker." (*Id.* at pp. 15-16.)

In the present case, appellant contends a report of hearing was prepared and made available to the Department's decision maker, and that the decision in *Quintanar*, therefore, must control our disposition here. No concession similar to that in *Quintanar* has been made by the Department.

Whether a report was prepared and whether the decision maker or his advisors had access to the report are questions of fact. This Board has neither the facilities nor the authority to take evidence and make factual findings. In cases where the Board finds that there is relevant evidence that could not have been produced at the hearing before the Department, it is authorized to remand the matter to the Department for reconsideration in light of that evidence. (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 23085.)

In the present case, evidence of the alleged violation by the Department could not have been presented at the administrative hearing because, if it occurred, it occurred *after* the hearing. Evidence regarding any Report of Hearing in this particular case is clearly relevant to the question of whether the Department has proceeded in the manner required by law. We conclude that this matter must be remanded to the Department for a full evidentiary hearing so that the facts regarding the existence and disposition of any such report may be determined.⁴

⁴ The Department has suggested that, if the matter is remanded, the Board should simply order the parties to submit declarations regarding the facts. This, we believe, would be wholly inadequate. In order to ensure due process to both parties on remand, there must be provision for cross-examination.

The hearing on remand will necessarily involve evidence presented by various administrators, attorneys, and other employees of the Department. While we do not
(continued...)

ORDER

The decision of the Department is affirmed as to all issues raised other than that regarding the allegation of an ex parte communication in the form of a Report of Hearing, and the matter is remanded to the Department for an evidentiary hearing in accordance with the foregoing opinion.⁵

FRED ARMENDARIZ, CHAIRMAN
SOPHIE C. WONG, MEMBER
TINA FRANK, MEMBER
ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGE CONTROL
APPEALS BOARD

⁴(...continued)

question the impartiality of the Department's own administrative law judges, we cannot think of a better way for the Department to avoid the possibility of the appearance of bias in these hearings than to have them conducted by administrative law judges from the independent Office of Administrative Hearings. This Board cannot, of course, require the Department to do so, but we offer this suggestion in the good faith belief that it would ease the procedural and logistical difficulties for all parties involved.

⁵ This order of remand is filed in accordance with Business and Professions Code section 23085, and does not constitute a final order within the meaning of Business and Professions Code section 23089.