

Columbia becomes first city in state to increase tobacco sale age

By [Andrew Denney](#)

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The Columbia City Council voted at its regular meeting on Monday night to increase the minimum sale age for tobacco products and e-cigarettes to 21 years old and added e-cigarettes to the city's indoor smoking ban, making Columbia the only city in the state to increase the age restriction for tobacco sales.

"We are giving families healthier lives together," said First Ward Councilwoman Ginny Chadwick, who sponsored the bills, before voting to support the age increase. She and other supporters have noted that most smokers become hooked in the years leading up to their 21st birthday, when their brains are still developing, and that reducing their access to tobacco products might prevent them from taking up the habit long-term.

The council voted 6-1 on each of three bills to implement the changes, with Fifth Ward Councilwoman Laura Nauser voting against each of them. Penalties for breaking the law apply to sellers of tobacco, who would be charged \$100 for the first violation in a two-year period, \$250 for the second violation, \$500 for the third and \$1,000 for each additional violation.

The council voted on the tobacco age bill after almost two hours of testimony from a diverse group of residents that included convenience store owners, students and medical professionals. Many of those who spoke in favor of the bill — including council members — shared personal anecdotes about how their own tobacco use or tobacco use by friends or loved ones had affected their lives.

Mayor Bob McDavid is seen as one of the council's more business-friendly members but voted in support of the three bills. He is a retired obstetrician and said that he often found himself in the position of "pleading with" patients to give up smoking. Third Ward Councilman Karl Skala and Fourth Ward Councilman Ian Thomas both said they took up smoking when they were 14 years old and later struggled to quit.

Opponents of the legislation argued the bills would chase sales tax dollars out of the city.

Mark Fenner, CEO of MFA Oil, which operates 16 Break Time convenience stores in Columbia, testified that 18- to 20-year-olds tend to be more mobile than other age groups and that it's not a long drive to reach convenience stores at Midway or Lake of the Woods.

"It simply makes it harder to do business here," Fenner said.

Before voting against the bill, Nauser said her "libertarian streak" was leading her to vote "no" and cautioned that some cities have taken public health legislation as far as restricting trans fats and soft drinks.

"We can make an argument about almost anything we do in government that it's 'in our best interest,'" Nauser said.

Columbia is the sixth city in the state to approve restrictions on e-cigarette use in public places. The other cities are Branson, Creve Coeur, Jefferson City, St. Joseph and Washington. Traci Kennedy, executive director of Tobacco Free Missouri, said that just this year, more than 100 cities across the United States enacted restrictions on the use of e-cigarettes, bringing the total number of cities across the country with such regulations to more than 200.

Council members who voted in favor of the bill to include e-cigarettes in the city's ban on smoking in public indoor spaces — which was approved on a 4-3 vote in 2006 after extended public testimony — said they were sympathetic to people who are using e-cigarettes to kick addictions to tobacco products, but the change would make rules for e-cigarettes consistent with those for tobacco products.

“It’s a shame that sometimes we have to legislate common courtesy,” said Second Ward Councilman Michael Trapp.

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