

# Opinion: Raise the age

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The Tobacco 21 Initiative is an effort worth supporting and it makes sense for the Lawrence School Board to join.

Members of the School Board were asked to endorse the initiative at a board meeting Monday. The board is expected to approve a resolution supporting the initiative at its next meeting. Several local agencies, including Lawrence Memorial Hospital, Health Care Access, Just Food and the Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center, have already endorsed the initiative.

The American Lung Association launched the Tobacco 21 initiative in an effort to get states across the country to join Hawaii and California in raising the minimum sales age for all tobacco products to 21. As of August, 190 cities and communities in 14 states have local Tobacco 21 laws in effect, including New York City, Boston and Chicago.

LiveWell Lawrence is pushing for Lawrence and other cities in Douglas County to implement 21 as the minimum age for buying tobacco products within their city limits. Kansas City, Bonner Springs, Iola, Lenexa, Olathe, Lansing, Prairie Village and Wyandotte County all have adopted local Tobacco 21 laws.

LiveWell Lawrence hopes to build a coalition of community support before urging the Lawrence City Commission to adopt a Tobacco 21 ordinance.

Currently, the age for all tobacco products is 18. Nine out of 10 smokers report trying their first cigarette by age 18, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Chris Tilden, the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department's community health director, said studies suggest that underage smokers have access to tobacco products from peers who are just old enough to buy tobacco products. Pushing the legal age to 21 makes it harder for those underage to get access to tobacco and increases the odds that they won't become smokers.

"What we're trying to do is make it unlikely that they'll start before they're 21, in which case it's unlikely that they'll start in their lifetime," Tilden said.

The Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association opposes Tobacco 21 ordinances as government overreaching. Association President Tom Palace has said the initiative will simply push minors to go elsewhere for tobacco. Estimates are that tobacco products account for up to 25 percent of inside store sales in convenience stores.

But there can be no denying the health risks associated with smoking and other tobacco products. As with alcohol and gambling, it makes sense to delay the decision to use such products until the age of 21. The Tobacco 21 initiative can save lives and is a cause worth supporting.