Columbus City Council approves measure banning sale of tobacco to those under 21

By Courtney Yuen

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COLUMBUS (WCMH) — The City of Columbus is raising the legal age to buy tobacco products from 18 to 21.

Columbus City Council members passed the "Tobacco 21" bill on Monday, 7-0. The legislation was sponsored by President Pro Tem Priscilla Tyson.

Supporters said it's meant to save lives and prevent kids from ever using tobacco.

"There's so many other things you could fit in with… same shoes, the clothes, but smoking, doing something to your body, it's not worth it," said 17-year-old Gahanna-Lincoln High School senior Kiana Locke.

Locke testified in front of City Council on Monday.

"In high school, it's really easy if you know a senior who's birthday already happened, it's really easy to find an 18-year-old to get it, but now I feel that it's 21 is the age, it's going to be hard for especially people in high school to get," said Locke.

Dr. Rob Crane said this new law is a prevention tool that really works. He's a clinical professor at The Ohio State University, as well as founder and president of the Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation .

"I think we introduced the first legislation in Ohio 20 years ago," he said. "It took a long time to kind of get traction, but now that we have several reports from the Surgeon General, from the Institute of Medicine, we really see the science behind this."

He cites the book, "Public Health Implications of Raising the Minimum Age of Legal Access to Tobacco Products,"

which was a study requested by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) back in 2013.

"Moving tobacco to 21 will save according to this book, about 4.2 million years of life just among kids alive today," said Dr. Crane. "Studies in Massachusetts have shown that it reduces high school smoking by about half."

He said most people don't begin to smoke until after the age of 21.

"95% of smokers have already started smoking by that age," said Dr. Crane.

Phillip Green-Poisson, 23, fits into this statistic. He said he started smoking when he was 14.

"Yeah, I quit for a while and then the only time you get a break in the military is when you smoke, so you smoke in the military," he said. "It's probably for the best because people shouldn't be smoking. I wish I didn't smoke, but it is what it is."

Manager at Burning Leaf Cigars Nate Hale said the law won't really affect his shop that much; most of his customers are already over the age of 21. But, he thinks the legal age to buy tobacco should stay at 18.

"If you're old enough to vote and you're a legal adult now and you can join the armed forces… For those guys, it's kind of unfair that they have to take on a responsibility such as serving their country but they can't enjoy a cigar," he said.

The age restriction applies to any tobacco product or tobacco paraphernalia, including cigarettes, pipes, rolling papers, hookah and e-cigarettes.

Dr. Hale said there are about 2,000 stores in Columbus that would be affected by this new law. The businesses will be required to purchase an annual sales license for $150. Stores that are caught selling tobacco to anyone under 21 will have to pay a fine of $500 for the first offense and $1,000 for subsequent violations.

However, the law does not criminalize the physical act of smoking if you're under the age of 21.

"18 to 21-year-old's who are caught with a cigarette don't have any particular penalty," said Dr. Hale. "We want to enforce this on the folks who are selling the cigarettes, who are making the profit. We don't want smoking while black to be an issue."

The new law will take effect in September 2017. Columbus now joins Bexley, Upper Arlington, Grandview Heights and New Albany, where the minimum age to buy tobacco has already been raised to 21.