

# Flagler teens out to blunt tobacco sales

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A trio of Flagler Palm Coast High School students are working to win the support of local governments in an effort to have the eligible age to purchase tobacco products raised from 18 to 21.

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PALM COAST — Nearly 500,000 Americans die annually from the effects of tobacco products, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That roughly compares to three fully populated 747s crashing each day for a year.

But where the latter scenario would surely prompt unprecedented news coverage, the former does not.

A group of Flagler County teens is using that point — and that analogy — to try to persuade elected officials to raise the age that a person can legally buy tobacco from 18 to 21.

“Raising the age does mean fewer new smokers,” student Daniel Thomas told members of the Palm Coast City Council last week. “Research has shown that in their 20s, people are less willing to try smoking than if they were to smoke when they were younger.”

In fact, most of those who reach their mid-20s without forming the habit simply won’t smoke at all, according to Cheryl Massaro, director of the Flagler Youth Center where Students Working Against Tobacco, or SWAT, has its meetings. Two of the teens involved in this project are active in SWAT: Thomas and Kamrin Bunn.

Thomas, Bunn and Bella Giuliano — all Flagler Palm Coast High School seniors — launched their project, Tobacco 21, in November. They hope to see a tobacco sale ordinance passed at the county level in April.

But before approaching the County Commission, the trio wants to win support from local municipalities. Their first stop was Palm Coast.

On Tuesday, the students made their case during a regular council meeting and requested that the city send a letter of support to the Flagler County Commission. The response was positive.

“I think it’s great what you’re doing,” said council member Heidi Shipley. “You’re saving lives, is what you’re doing. You might not see the effects of it right now, but you’re saving lives.”

Mayor Milissa Holland agreed.

“I, for one, will 100 percent support this initiative,” she said. “Anything I can do to support it out in the community, I will do equally. It is something that’s still shocking to me that people take on smoking as a habit with all the information that’s available to us today.”

The students plan next to give their presentation before the Bunnell City Commission and then the Flagler Beach City Commission. Finally, they will address the County Commission.

Sales strategy

The team's focus on sales, rather than simply attempting to raise the eligible age to smoke, is deliberate. The latter would require action by the state Legislature, which would require a vigilant, long-term effort. It would also invite

opposition by the tobacco industry.

Sales, however, can be addressed on the local level.

To counter the argument that raising the age for tobacco sales would have little effect, since smokers could simply make their purchases across the county line, the students point to Needham, Massachusetts.

In 2005, that town also increased its age for purchasing tobacco. And despite its being surrounded by urban areas, the smoking rate there decreased.

“It actually did work,” said Bunn.

If such an ordinance were to pass here, Flagler would become the first county in Florida to raise the age for tobacco sales.

To date, 200 municipalities and 11 counties in 12 states, as well as all of Hawaii and California, have raised the tobacco sales age to 21.

By lobbying for the county ordinance, the students also hope to curtail illegal tobacco use among younger children. Researching the topic, the students found that the majority of people who supply tobacco to those under the age of 18 are under 21 themselves.

#### Strengthen and protect

In addition to traditional smoking, the Tobacco 21 project aims to fight access to e-cigarettes among teens. The students said they have witnessed an increase in vaping among their peers.

According to this year’s Florida Youth Tobacco Survey, about a quarter of youth between the ages of 11 and 17 in Volusia and Flagler counties said they have tried vaping.

Not strictly a tobacco product, e-cigarettes use liquids containing nicotine, and concerns about their safety abound.

“That is something that we do have to tackle as well, just educating our peers that e-cigarettes have the same harmful effects and are not something to play around with,” said Thomas, who is planning a career in public health.

Tobacco 21 is a CAS project that will fulfill the students’ International Baccalaureate requirement. CAS stands for Creativity, Activity, Service.

“The main point of this project is just to strengthen our community, strengthen our youth and also protect our youth, as well,” said Thomas.