

Bill to increase legal smoking age may pass

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March 8, 2017

Pacific Daily News

<http://www.guampdn.com/story/news/2017/03/08/bill-increase-legal-smoking-age-may-pass/98887340/>

A bill that aims to raise the legal smoking age from 18 to 21 may pass in the Guam Legislature this week.

Several lawmakers spoke favorably about the measure during session Wednesday morning.

A chorus of health care professionals and youth groups from across the island have backed Bill 9-34, the Youth Protection Act of 2017. If enacted, the bill would prohibit anyone under the age of 21 years old from smoking or purchasing cigarettes and other tobacco-related products, including e-cigarettes.

Speaker Benjamin Cruz, D-Tumon, who introduced the bill, credited the efforts of those groups and organizations for lobbying and swaying his colleagues.

“I plead, I implore my colleagues to please take the lead from our young (advocates). ... Many of them have been to your offices in the past several months explaining to you why they want ‘Tobacco 21,’” Cruz said. “I’m sure they’ve done a more excellent job than I could have.”

A March 2015 report, published by the Institute of Medicine, projected prevalent tobacco use in the nation would drop by 12 percent if the legal age to smoke was raised to 21. The report also predicted that raising the legal age to 21 would reduce the amount of deaths caused from lung cancer every year by 50,000.

Cruz introduced the measure first in 2015. It sat in committee for about a year. It eventually moved to the session floor last year and passed in a 9-6 vote. Gov. Eddie Calvo vetoed the bill, saying the measure would have taken away the individual responsibility of adults.

Republicans Sen. James Espaldon, the minority leader, and freshman Sen. Fernando Esteves said they’ve been on the fence about the bill.

Esteves said he didn’t officially make up his mind until the morning of session, while on his way to work.

“I’ve been very, very torn on this issue as of late. Honestly, up until today and this morning I was against the measure,” Esteves said. “On my way into work this morning, I saw a kid at a bus stop smoking, vaping. To me enough was enough. ... I do support now the initiative to move forward with raising the legal age to smoking to 21.”

Espaldon was one of six senators last term to vote against the measure, along with Sen. Dennis Rodriguez Jr. and former Sens. Tony Ada, Frank Blas Jr., Brant McCreadie and Rory Respicio.

During the public hearing on the bill last month, Espaldon said while the statistics and data on smoking and tobacco use were valid, but was wrestling with the idea of prohibiting a legal product from a certain group of legal adults.

“Where does it stop?” Espaldon asked during last month’s public hearing. “I just haven’t reconciled in my mind limiting a legal product to a legal adult.”

After giving lengthy testimony Wednesday, the Republican leader said he'd changed his mind.

“This is the time to support this legislation for the health of our young people,” he said. “They need to be of sound body and sound mind. And I support all the efforts of these groups and organizations have done” to drive the issue forward.

During session lawmakers also approved a proposal from Esteves to further update Guam’s tobacco laws by doubling the fines associated with selling tobacco to minors. A first-time violator would be fined \$1,000 under the updated measure, instead of the \$500 the law currently mandates.

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