

Nassau Democrats move to raise tobacco-purchase age to 21

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Robert Brodsky



Patricia Bishop-Kelly, a member of the American Cancer Society's Cancer Action Network and the Suffolk County Board of Health, speaks at a news conference at the Nassau County Executive Building to call for raising the legal smoking age on Monday, April 24, 2017. Photo Credit: Newsday / Thomas A. Ferrara

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Minority Democrats in the Nassau County Legislature on Monday moved to revive a bill to raise the age to purchase tobacco products from 19 to 21 — a move that would mirror recent changes in Suffolk County, North Hempstead and New York City.

Sponsors of the Nassau bill, known as “Tobacco 21,” say it is necessary to protect the health of young residents and to ensure uniformity with neighboring municipalities.

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“It makes no sense that kids under 21 can buy cigarettes and tobacco products in some communities within this county and not in others,” Legis. Arnold Drucker (D-Plainview), the bill’s lead sponsor, said at a news conference in Mineola. “The playing field and the rules must be equal and level all over Nassau County.”

Drucker was joined by Democratic lawmakers, anti-smoking advocates and medical professionals who testified in

favor of the bill at Monday's legislative meeting.

Michael Seilback, a spokesman for the American Lung Association, said nearly 95 percent of smokers pick up the habit before they turn 21.

"If we can prevent this next generation of kids from starting this deadly addiction we can save hundreds of lives in Nassau County," Seilback said.

Democratic Legis. Judy Jacobs, who died in September, had championed legislation to raise the county's smoking age. But the GOP majority declined to call Jacobs' bill for a hearing or vote, arguing the issue was best handled by the state.

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"As with all newly introduced items, we will research and review this bill," Presiding Officer Norma Gonsalves (R-East Meadow) said in a statement Monday.

Jim Calvin, president of the New York Association of Convenience Stores, said the proposed law will have little impact as roughly half of all cigarettes smoked statewide are purchased from unregulated black market dealers or on Indian reservations.

"And that's not going to change whether the smoking age is 21, 25 or 50," Calvin said.

Calvin did not back up his assertion. But a study by the Tax Foundation, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit that focuses on tax reform, found that more than 55 percent of cigarettes smoked in New York State in 2014 came from smuggled sources.

In 2014, the Suffolk County Legislature voted to raise the age for purchasing tobacco from 19 to 21 despite heavy resistance from local convenience stores. New York City also raised the age to 21 in 2014.

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Suffolk Legis. William Spencer (D-Centerport), a physician, said retailers complained at the time that "the sky would fall" and sales would decline. But he said the effect on retailers has been minimal.

"This isn't about politics," Spencer said. "This is about science. This is about the developing brain. This is about the ability to resist addiction."

The Democrat-led Town of North Hempstead raised the age to buy tobacco to 21 last year, and the GOP-controlled Hempstead Town Board is now considering a similar move.

The state age for purchasing tobacco products is 18, although the State Legislature is considering increasing the age to 21.