

Scituate and Hudson raise tobacco-buying age to 21 - South

By Jessica Bartlett | Globe Staff March 02, 2014

Scituate and Hudson last week became the latest Massachusetts communities to join the move to raise the minimum age for buying cigarettes to 21.

“We said, ‘If we’re going to do it, let’s just do it,’” said Scituate Board of Health chairman Russell Clark, after his board voted Monday to raise the age to 21 from 18. “Twenty-one seemed to be the number, and if that’s what liquor sales are, then maybe that’s what tobacco sales should be.”

The age increase was coupled with increased compliance checks, restrictions to e-cigarettes and cigars, prohibition of cigar and hookah bars, and stricter penalties for sale violations.

Hudson jumped on the bandwagon the next day. In addition to raising the minimum age to 21, officials prohibited the sale of tobacco in health care businesses, such as pharmacies.

“This will be a long-term effort,” said Sam Wong, Hudson’s director of public and community health services.

Stricter regulations regarding the sale of tobacco products are becoming more common in Massachusetts.

Since Needham increased the tobacco buying age to 21 in 2005, 15 other communities have decided to raise the age to 19 or 21, from the previous age of 18, according to the Municipal Tobacco Control Technical Assistance Program.

“We know that 80 percent of adult smokers began smoking daily before 20 years of age, and the Needham effort [to raise the buying age] has indicated that the smoking rate among high school students can be lowered significantly with this policy,” Wong said. “As these population segments get older, we project a lower adult smoking rate among our residents.”

In 2012, the purchasing age rose to 19 in Belmont and Watertown. Higher age mandates have since taken effect in Brookline, Westwood, Sharon, Walpole, Canton, Ashland, Sudbury, Dedham, and Dover.

Wellesley’s increase to 21 is set to take effect in June. Arlington is gradually increasing its age limits, and will reach 21 on July 1, 2015.

“That’s 5 percent” of Massachusetts residents, said the tobacco control project’s director, D.J. Wilson, who works for the Massachusetts Municipal Association. “We’re getting there. Half that list didn’t exist six months ago.”

Around the nation, Alaska, Alabama, Utah, New Jersey, and three counties in New York state raised the age to purchase cigarettes to 19. New York City and Hawaii have voted increases to 21.

Wilson said the change is akin to the age increase for alcohol sales.

“Most of us over 50 remember when [the drinking age] was 18, and most towns would agree you’d never go back to 18 for alcohol. It has slowed down the usage,” Wilson said.

The desire to keep cigarettes out of teenage hands has been propelled by data suggesting that the earlier smokers start, the harder it is to quit.

“We all know someone who started smoking at 11, 12, 13. If we can move that up to 21 . . . they will have less health

damage and an easier chance to quit,” Wilson said.

E-cigarettes also have the potential to increase smoking among teens, Wilson said, all the more reason to cut off teen access.

In Hudson, Wong said the effect on underage smoking was a primary reason his community voted for the change, which takes effect on July 1.

Officials hope the higher age limits will shrink minors’ access to cigarettes, since more than 90 percent of people who purchase tobacco cigarettes for minors are under 21, Wong said, citing a study performed at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester.

Since Needham raised the age limit, the smoking rate at its high school has dropped 50 percent, Wong said. Hudson wants to replicate that success.

Though lower than the state average of 15.9 percent, Hudson has one of the highest smoking rates in the suburbs west of Boston, at 12.8 percent of the population from 2007-2009, according to the MetroWest Region Community Health Needs Assessment released last September.

The town also has a lung-cancer death rate of 54.6 per 100,000 people from 2005-2009, the MetroWest study showed. That is the fifth-highest for 16 towns in the region, and higher than the state average of 50.7 per 100,000 people in that period.

The health benefits can be a fair trade-off for local retailers who will lose business. According to Wong, the new regulations are estimated to cut revenue by 2 percent, a concern expressed at several hearings.

In contrast to the disquiet in Hudson, only one Scituate business owner voiced concerns about the new regulations, mainly regarding the provision outlawing the sale of single cigars that cost less than \$2.50.

“Our regulation goes into effect May 1, and I hope that gives them enough time to dispose of that product,” Scituate’s Clark said.

Beyond that, the mandate was passed without dispute or fanfare, and many people Clark spoke with said they are on board with the changes.

“Everyone I’ve talked to said it was a good thing, and a lot of people I’ve talked to are smokers,” he said.

There also was little debate when Dedham officials voted last November to raise the minimum age for cigarette purchases to 21. In addition to the age increase, Dedham outlawed single cigar sales under \$2.50, drastically increased suspensions for violations, and prohibited tobacco sales in stores that employ health care professionals.

Nearly two months since changes went into effect, the only fallout has been with BJ’s Wholesale Club, which is seeking a variance to sell tobacco despite having an ophthalmologist on site.

“The board will make its final decision on March 5 whether or not they will be able to sell [tobacco],” said Dedham health director Catherine Cardinale.

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