

Hawaii lawmakers consider raising legal smoking age to 21

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ

HONOLULU — It could get a lot harder to smoke traditional and electronic cigarettes in Hawaii, especially for young people.

State lawmakers are considering raising the legal smoking age from 18 to 21 for traditional and electronic cigarettes. They're also considering banning both forms of smoking in the state's parks and public hospital system.

The House Committee on Judiciary advanced the bill to raise the legal smoking age, HB 385, on Tuesday.

"It's important to protect the younger generations from tobacco use," said Jessica Yamauchi, executive director of the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Hawaii. "Tobacco companies intentionally target youth to find 'replacement smokers' to ensure the economic future of the tobacco industry."

In Hawaii, 5,600 students from sixth to 12th grade try smoking for the first time every year, and as a result, 1,400 become regular smokers, according to the coalition.

Supporters of the bill said e-cigarette companies also are targeting young people by creating products that taste like candy or fruit punch.

"Many of my friends have fallen into the habit of taking years off of their lives," said Sarina Reilly, a senior at Kapolei High School. "When I walk into the bathroom during lunch, it smells like I walked into a cotton candy factory, and I'm shocked to realize it's just a few girls smoking a flavored (electronic) cigarette."

No one spoke against the measure during the hearing, but opponents in written testimony argued that if 18-year-olds are considered mature enough to vote, join the military and serve on juries, then they're old enough to make their own decisions about smoking. They also argued that electronic cigarettes shouldn't be included in the bans because they haven't been scientifically proven to be unsafe.

Supporters of the ban counter that electronic cigarettes are unregulated, and that vapors from the devices contain tobacco, chemicals and metal.

The panel also advanced bills to ban smoking traditional or electronic smoking devices, regardless of age, in state parks and public hospitals.

Advocates for the ban in state parks said litter from cigarette butts is a problem. In an island-wide cleanup of Maui beaches, volunteers from the Surfrider Foundation picked up more than 14,000 cigarette butts in less than two hours, said Stuart Coleman, the group's Hawaii coordinator.

"Most people don't realize that they are plastic, and don't biodegrade and they're toxic," Coleman said.

All three bills now go to the full House for a vote. Because the committee wasn't in full agreement the smoking proposals, Chairman Karl Rhoads recommended keeping a faulty effective date in all three of the bills, a move which ensures that each bill will eventually return to the committee if passed by the Senate.