

Gill board bans tobacco sales to teens

By CHRIS CURTIS Recorder Staff Thursday, May 28, 2015 (Published in print: Friday, May 29, 2015)

GILL — Effective Sept. 1, the age to buy cigarettes in town will jump three years to 21, part of a statewide push to move tobacco beyond the threat range for nicotine addiction.

This week, Gill's Board of Health joined its neighbor across the river and a number of other area towns in passing the new regulations, which will also ban a number of tobacco products including blunt wraps and flavored tobacco from shelves.

Montague was the first in Franklin County to pass the regulations, drafted and offered by the state Department of Public Health, and Leverett and Greenfield followed suit, although Greenfield's regulations face an opposing ordinance by Town Councilor Isaac Mass.

"Mainly really the studies show if you can keep tobacco away from youth until after 19 the odds they'll start go lower and lower," said Gill Health Board member Randy Crochier of the board's decision. Crochier said the board heard no opposition on the question.

"We had many letters in support, we had four or five people present in support, but no opposition," Crochier said. There are two tobacco license holders in town: a package store and a gas station shop.

Mary Kersell, tobacco control coordinator for the DPH grant-funded Substance and Tobacco Prevention Partnership of Hampshire and Franklin Counties, has been spreading the proposed regulations among her more than 20 member towns in the two counties.

In Franklin County, Sunderland, Whately, Shelburne, Buckland and Charlemont have pending hearings, she said, and Deerfield has asked for a copy.

In Hampshire County, she said, Granby has passed the flavor ban but not the age change, Hatfield and Amherst passed both, and Hadley the age but not the flavor.

Kersell said that as a home rule state, Massachusetts leaves regulations up to town health boards. In past instances such as the workplace smoking ban, legislators might propose a comparable state rules once a tipping point is reached in the number of towns adopting regulations, Kersell said.

That tipping point has not been reached, said Cheryl Sbarra. Sbarra is senior staff attorney for the Mass. Association of Health Boards, an association providing technical assistance and legal education to the 351 local health boards.

"We've got about 54 municipalities right now that have the minimum legal sales age, so I don't think we're at a tipping point there yet," she said. An earlier effort, banning the sale of tobacco by pharmacies, is further advanced.

"Right now we are at 65 percent and then some of the population lives in a municipality that does this," Sbarra said. "It's 119 municipalities, so we're getting really close to a tipping point for that strategy."

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