

California Senate approves increase in legal age to buy tobacco

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With no debate and bipartisan support, the state Senate voted 26-8 on Tuesday to raise the legal age to buy tobacco in California from 18 to 21.

Senate Bill 151 aims to keep cigarettes out of the hands of teenagers. Nine in 10 smokers take up the habit by age 18 according to the American Lung Association in California, and 36,000 California kids start smoking each year.

“Cigarettes are the single most dangerous consumer product ever sold,” said Sen. Ed Hernandez, D-Azusa, the measure’s author. “It’s time to stop allowing tobacco companies to make their deadly product so readily available to our youth.”

Even as tobacco companies are increasing their influence again at the Capitol, shedding a once-toxic reputation, SB 151 received unanimous support from Democrats, as well as yes votes from four Republican senators: Tom Berryhill of Twain Harte, Ted Gaines of Roseville, Janet Nguyen of Garden Grove and Jeff Stone of Temecula.

If SB 151 is approved by the Assembly and Gov. Jerry Brown, California would be one of the first states in the country to raise its legal tobacco purchase age to 21. A bill in Hawaii is currently awaiting the governor’s signature.

The Senate also considered on Tuesday two bills to place additional restrictions on e-cigarettes.

Senate Bill 140, which defines the devices as tobacco products, was sent to the Assembly by a vote of 24-12. Under the new definition, e-cigarettes would be banned from the same “smoke-free” areas as traditional cigarettes, such as bars, restaurants, hospitals and other workplaces, and the legal age to buy the devices would be raised to 21 by SB 151.

But a similar proposal to prohibit e-cigarettes in smoke-free areas and raise the legal purchase age to 21 without changing their definition fell one vote short of approval. Senate Bill 24 may be reconsidered later this week.

Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson, D-Santa Barbara, voted for SB 140 and against SB 24. She said the effort to regulate e-cigarettes is far less significant if their definition is not changed to tobacco products, and she worried that sending both bills to the Assembly would give the tobacco industry leverage to kill the tougher restrictions of SB 140.

Sen. Jerry Hill, who authored SB 24, acknowledged that his bill would be unnecessary if SB 140 becomes law. But the San Mateo Democrat added that it was important to have both options available to the Assembly and Brown so that some protections are passed this year.

“We’re in a political building, and no one knows at the end of the day what’s going to be left standing,” he said.