

# KC civic leaders call on cities to raise legal age for buying cigarettes to 21

By Alan Bavley  
abavley@kcstar.com

Kansas City civic leaders want to make it just as hard to buy a pack of cigarettes as it is to buy a six-pack of beer.

At a press conference Thursday morning, the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City and other organizations announced Tobacco 21/KC, a campaign to get every municipality in the metro area to raise its legal age for buying tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, from 18 to 21, the same as it is for alcohol.

If successful, Kansas City would become the second largest metro area in the United States, after New York City, to raise the minimum tobacco age to 21.

Rewriting ordinances in the 100 or so municipalities would be as easy as “literally one stroke of the pen” to change 18 to 21, said Chamber of Commerce President Jim Heeter. “I don’t see a downside. The evidence is so overwhelming to public health.”

The rationale for raising the age is to cut off access to tobacco among children in their teens, the age when most confirmed smokers get hooked, said Jessica Hembree of the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City. High school seniors who have reached their 18th birthday are the “pipeline” for tobacco into schools, she said.

“I think this is common around the high school,” said Jordan Elder, 17, a senior at Park Hill High School and co-chair of Youth with Vision, a Northland student group advocating on drug and alcohol issues.

High school seniors who’ve turned 18 will often buy cigarettes for underclassmen, she said. “They think they’re being nice.”

The Health Care Foundation has set aside money for a tobacco quit line for young smokers who would be affected if the tobacco purchase age is raised.

Momentum to raise the legal age for purchasing tobacco has been increasing over the past few years.

One of the first municipalities to raise its purchase age was the Boston suburb of Needham in 2005. By 2010, its youth smoking rate had dropped from 13 percent to 6.7 percent. Since then, more than 90 municipal and county governments have raised their purchase age, according to the Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation.

In 2014, New York became the largest city to raise the age. This year, Hawaii became the first state. In December, Columbia became the first city in Missouri to raise the age. So far, most of the cities to have made the change have been in Massachusetts and New Jersey. A handful are in California, Illinois and Ohio. No cities in Kansas have done so.

The Tobacco 21/KC campaign already has garnered the support of more than 100 local businesses, hospitals and clinics, as well as community, religious and health organizations. Its organizers also have started discussions with area elected officials to begin the process of changing municipal ordinances. It has started a [petition](https://www.change.org/p/elected-officials-amp-policy-makers-in-greater-kansas-city-tobacco-21-kc) online at <https://www.change.org/p/elected-officials-amp-policy-makers-in-greater-kansas-city-tobacco-21-kc>.

Michael Grimaldi, spokesman for Kansas City Mayor Sly James, said James “supports the concept behind the initiative.”

Local efforts to ban smoking in public places ran into stiff opposition from bars and restaurants and took years to accomplish. Health advocates also have failed to raise tobacco taxes in Missouri, which remain the lowest in the nation.

Heeter said the campaign to raise the tobacco purchase age to 21 may face some opposition from large sellers of tobacco products, such as convenience stores. That resistance, however, is less likely to be as strong at the municipal level as it would be at the state level, he said.

And with a poll by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showing support among 75 percent of adults nationwide for raising the age to 21, Heeter hoped that it would have an easier time getting through city councils, and that momentum will build as cities pass the measure. "I would want to think that no municipality would want to be the outlier," he said.

Tobacco 21/KC is part of the [Healthy KC initiative](#) the Chamber of Commerce and Blue Cross and Blue Shield launched early this year to improve the overall health of residents of the metro area. The initiative's workplace wellness program recently announced that it had certified 130 area employers.

## **[Raising the age to buy tobacco products in KC](#)**

Kansas City civic leaders, businesses and health organizations have launched a campaign to raise the legal age to buy tobacco products, including e-cigarettes, in the metro area from 18 to 21.

Alan Bavley: [816-234-4858](tel:816-234-4858), [@AlanBavley](#)