

KC and KCK should raise legal age to 21 to reduce teenage smoking

The Editorial Board

The timing couldn't be better for two area cities on Thursday to vote on raising the legal age from 18 to 21 to purchase tobacco products and e-cigarettes.

Thursday is the [American Cancer Society's Great American Smokeout](#). It's also when the Kansas City Council and the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kan., Board of Commissioners should join more than 90 cities in the U.S. that have passed Tobacco 21 measures. The Kansas City ordinances would include one prohibiting the use of vapor products in enclosed public areas.

The Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City in April launched [Healthy KC](#). For the metropolitan area of 2 million people, it's promoting better nutrition, more physical activity, better work-life balance and tobacco cessation through [Tobacco 21|KC](#).

Jim Heeter, the chamber's president and chief executive, was among speakers Wednesday at a Kansas City Council committee hearing, urging the age increase for the purchase of e-cigarettes and tobacco, nicotine and vapor products. Other supporters cited the cancer deaths and illnesses of loved ones. Opponents included e-cigarette, vapor and cigar store owners, saying the proposals were too broad and went too far.

KC Council committee supports raising legal age for tobacco purchases from 18 to 21

But the health benefits affecting about a third of the metro area population should make the vote in Kansas City and Kansas City, Kan./Wyandotte County a no-brainer. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports that cigarette smoking claims more than 480,000 lives a year in the United States, including nearly 42,000 individuals because of secondhand smoke. Cancer, stroke, heart disease and type 2 diabetes are among chronic health problems tied to smoking.

Every day, more than 3,200 people under age 18 light up their first cigarette. The addictive power of tobacco products is greater on teenage brains. About 95 percent of long-term smokers started before age 21.

The American Cancer Society's Great American Smokeout occurs the third Thursday every year since 1976 and encourages smokers to quit for the day and to make plans to quit forever. The proposals in the two Kansas Cities would help. Younger teens depend on older peers to purchase tobacco products for them.

Bridget McCandless, co-chair of the Healthy KC Commission and president and chief executive of the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City, told the council committee that pushing the legal age to 21 to purchase tobacco products and e-cigarettes would keep lifelong bad health habits from starting.

Cities that have raised the age have reported a dramatic reduction in teen smoking but only a 2 percent annual drop in tobacco sales.

Heeter explained that a goal is to push Kansas City to the top of the list of healthy places nationwide. Passing Tobacco 21 measures would be a step in the right direction.

Getting two of the largest cities in the metropolitan area to raise the legal age for tobacco product and e-cigarette purchases should spur other municipalities to do the same.

It would help reduce health care costs and improve the quality of life for everyone.