

Paterson raises cigarette buying age to 21

The city council approved a measure on Tuesday evening raising the cigarette purchasing age from 19 to 21.

The measure bars anyone underage the age of 21 from purchasing tobacco, nicotine, nicotine delivery products, smoking devices, and anything else that can be smoked, according to the ordinance.

"Absolutely nothing is accomplished except that local business is harmed," said Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store, Automotive Association (NJGCA), which represents small business.

Flanked by two local business owners, Risalvato said the measure will do great damage to the bottom line of small businesses in the city. He said the playing field will be made uneven, for stores in neighboring towns will be free to sell tobacco to anyone 19 or older.

He said many customers come into a convenience store to purchase cigarette, but leave buying other items. Risalvato cited a gas station where an individual might go to fill his tank and purchase a box of cigarette, but may no longer venture to patronize a city gas station if she is barred from buying in Paterson but is allowed to purchase in Clifton.

"These customers will go outside of Paterson," said Risalvato. He suggested the council pass a resolution in support of the measure before the New Jersey legislature rather than passing their own ordinance that will place local businesses at a competitive disadvantage with stores in surrounding towns.

If the state changes the buying age to 21 all businesses will be competing on a level playing field, argued Risalvato.

"Us doing that [raising buying age to 21] puts them at a competitive disadvantage," concurred Julio Tavarez, 5th Ward councilman. "It's not doing anything to help our situation."

Council members appeared more interested in targeting underage smokers. "I'd like to see more aggressive campaign on prevention," said Alex Mendez, councilman at-large. He said he sees young people outside city high schools puffing away.

"You should work to educate store owners," said Mohammed Akhtaruzzaman, 2nd Ward councilman. He suggested teaching convenience store owners about the law against selling loose cigarette.

City businesses are infamous for selling to juveniles and for peddling loose cigarettes. "It's not going to do anything until we enforce it," said Akhtaruzzaman.

Kenneth Morris, councilman at-large, who works in the healthcare field, acknowledged the grave dangers of smoking, but prefer state action rather than a municipal law. "I'd prefer this was handled by the state," he said.

"This is a moral issue underscored by a health issue," said James Staton, 1st Ward councilman.

Maritza Davila, councilwoman at-large, who smokes, said she supported the measure, for she would not want her son to grow up to be a smoker.

"The habits that we start are very difficult to stop," said Donna Nelson-Ivy, health director, who brought forth the measure.

The measure also had support from the Paterson Municipal Alliance. About a dozen speakers at the council meeting expressed their support for the measure.

Tavarez was the sole vote against the ordinance. He did not favor the measure because it would place city businesses on an uneven footing with stores in neighboring communities. He said, citing the Australia, the most effective way to deter potential smoker is by showcasing consequences on cigarette packets.

The ordinance cites the U.S. Surgeon General stating 90-percent of all tobacco users start before age 21. Tavarez skeptically looked at the data to find most smokers are initiated by their 18th birthday leaving little room for the ordinance to make much of a difference in the city.

“Nearly 9 out of 10 cigarette smokers first tried smoking by age 18,” according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).