

# KC, Wyandotte County raise legal age for tobacco purchases to 21

By Alan Bavley and Lynn Horsley The Kansas City Star

Hoping to curb underage smoking — and keep some teens from ever lighting up — Kansas City and Wyandotte County on Thursday banned sales of cigarettes and other tobacco products to people under age 21.

The Kansas City Council led the metro area in voting to raise the legal age for tobacco purchases from 18. Hours later, the Board of Commissioners of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kan., followed suit.

Erin Kennedy, 23, smoked a cigarette at Main Street Tobacco & Gifts, 4307 Main St., on Thursday, the day the Kansas City Council voted to raise the minimum age to buy cigarettes and other tobacco products to 21 from 18. Shane Keyser [skeyser@kcstar.com](mailto:skeyser@kcstar.com)



The Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce is hoping other local cities will join in, making the metro area the second largest in the country to take this step.

“This is a community-driven initiative,” Kansas City Councilman Scott Taylor said before the council’s vote. He said other regions have taken this step, but not many in the Midwest, so Kansas City could be a leader.

Taylor said even many adult smokers supported this action because they wished they had never started smoking. As many as 95 percent of smokers get addicted before age 21, he said, and young smokers often get their cigarettes from 18-year-olds who can purchase them.

Raising the legal age for these purchases, he said, cuts off the sale point and “breaks up the network.”

Mayor Mark Holland said the Unified Government coordinated with Kansas City leaders to make a bigger impact together. “I think this sends a strong message across the metropolitan area,” he said.

The Tobacco 21|KC campaign was launched in October by the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas City, and other organizations. The goal is 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.

Thursday’s votes were a big first step, supporters said.

“This is a time to really celebrate,” said Kansas City Health Department director Rex Archer. “It looks like our effort to reduce heart disease has stalled. This will be important in getting that going.”

Kansas City has lagged other cities nationwide in reducing its smoking rates, Archer said. Contributing to the problem, he said, have been Missouri’s limited commitment to smoking prevention and a state tobacco tax that is the lowest in the nation.

Raising the tobacco purchase age “will help us prevent folks from becoming addicted,” Archer said.

For the past few months, Tobacco 21|KC representatives have been meeting with elected officials from throughout

the region, focusing first on larger municipalities.

On Nov. 9, Bridget McCandless, CEO of the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City, spoke to the Independence City Council about the initiative. She plans to speak next in Lee's Summit.

Nationwide, more than 100 municipalities, including New York City, and the state of Hawaii have raised their tobacco purchase age to 21. In Missouri, Columbia had been the only city to do so. And until Thursday, no city in Kansas had.

The Kansas City Council voted on three measures: prohibiting the sale of tobacco products to those under age 21; prohibiting the sale of e-cigarettes, other vapor products and alternative nicotine products to those under age 21; and adding the use of vapor products to existing prohibitions on smoking in enclosed public areas such as restaurants and bars.

Councilman Quinton Lucas said he opposed the age change at first because he didn't want to criminalize behaviors by young people ages 18 to 21. But the ordinances make clear the penalty applies to the seller, not the purchaser. The penalty calls for a \$100 fine for a first offense.

The age measures take effect in 10 days; the vapor product prohibition in enclosed public areas will take effect in two months.

In Wyandotte County, the ordinance revision also applies to e-cigarettes and similar nicotine-delivery devices. The ordinance does not create penalties for possession of tobacco products by people under 21, but tobacco sellers are subject to a \$200 fine for underage sales. Retailers are required to post a sign showing the new age limit.

The ordinance takes effect after its publication on Nov. 26.

The Unified Government commissioners voted 6-1 to raise the tobacco-buying age to 21.

Holland said he hoped cutting down on smoking would improve the health of Wyandotte County residents, who often rank very low on health surveys. "I think it's important, particularly for a community that has a lack of access to health care," he said.

Commissioner Mike Kane voted against the ordinance.

Unlike Kansas City's indoor smoking ban, which raised the ire of many restaurant and bar owners, the tobacco purchase age measure didn't face organized opposition.

"I just don't have the resources to do anything at the local level," said Ronald J. Leone, executive director of the Missouri Petroleum & Convenience Store Association, who had argued against raising the purchase age in Columbia.

Leone said his organization seeks "uniformity and consistency" in regulation, rather than "piecemeal legislation at the local level." Whether to raise the tobacco purchase age is "a worthy discussion. We just think it should be at the state or federal level."

The convenience store association hasn't decided whether to seek state legislation to supersede local tobacco purchase age ordinances, Leone said.

Kansas City Council members had received some emails from local vapor shops arguing against the change. They said vapor products are a healthier alternative to traditional tobacco and that raising the legal age was an infringement on small-business rights.

But some health experts questioned the health benefits, and the council majority discounted those vapor shop arguments.

If the Tobacco 21|KC campaign is successful, the Kansas City area would become the second-largest metro area in

the United States, after New York City, to raise the minimum tobacco age to 21.

Momentum to raise the legal age for purchasing tobacco has been increasing in recent years. A poll by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found support among 75 percent of adults nationwide for raising the age to 21.

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.

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 Health Care Foundation has set aside money for a tobacco quit line for young smokers who would be affected by an increase in the tobacco purchase age.

The Star's Ian Cummings contributed to this story.

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