Why Portland should set the tobacco purchase age at 21

By The BDN Editorial Board

Portland city councilors will soon consider raising the city’s age for buying tobacco products to 21. Such a change makes sense for many reasons, including long-term health benefits.

The city’s public safety, health and human services committee is moving forward with a proposal to raise the legal age for buying tobacco products in Portland from 18 to 21. State law requires tobacco purchasers to be at least 18 years old. The proposal, which also would apply to e-cigarettes, now goes to the full council, which will consider it on April 25.

Portland would join more than 100 cities, including Boston, New York, Chicago, Cleveland and Kansas City (in both Missouri and Kansas), that already have raised the age to 21. On Jan. 1, Hawaii became the first state to require tobacco purchasers to be at least 21.

A decade ago, Needham, Massachusetts, became the first U.S. community to raise its tobacco purchase age to 21. The adult smoking rate in Needham is now half that of Massachusetts as a whole. The mortality rates from lung cancer in the community are significantly lower than in Massachusetts generally. Most important, a survey by the MetroWest Health Foundation found that the smoking rate among high school students in Needham was significantly lower than in surrounding communities, where the tobacco purchase age remained 18. This result undermines arguments from opponents of raising the smoking age who say teens will simply buy cigarettes in other communities or ask older friends to buy them smokes.

“I think this is the first sort of in-depth study that kind of validates what we know to be true, which is that availability and access to substances is a real risk factor, especially to adolescents,” Needham’s Public Health Director Timothy McDonald told the Needham Times.

Needham’s findings are supported by an Institute of Medicine report. Its research indicates that fewer people would begin the smoking habit if they could not buy tobacco products until they were 21. According to a March 2015 report by the institute, about 90 percent of smokers say they began before age 19. Raising the age to 21 would have a significant effect on high school-age smokers and potential smokers because their 18- to 20-year-old peers no longer would be able to legally purchase tobacco for them. In addition, the institute said, the parts of the brain responsible for decision making, impulse control and peer pressure response continue to develop into young adulthood.

The Institute of Medicine projects that tobacco use would drop by 12 percent with the legal age set at 21. Although it would take years for the full health effects to be known, the institute’s modeling shows the result would be 223,000 fewer premature deaths and 50,000 fewer lung cancer deaths among those born between 2000 and 2019. Collectively, this group also would see a reduction of 4.2 million years of life lost because of smoking-related health problems.

In Maine the teen smoking rate was cut by more than half between the late 1990s and 2007, when it began rising again. It since has dropped again and remains below the national average. Maine’s relatively high cigarette tax rate — $2 per pack, though it hasn’t changed in a decade — and historically high investment in anti-smoking efforts are among the reasons for the comparatively low teen smoking rate.

Maine’s adult smoking rate — 19.3 percent in 2014 — is above the national average of 16.8 percent. Adult smokers
have higher rates of asthma and worse dental health than nonsmokers. Life expectancy among smokers is 10 years shorter.

Raising the tobacco purchase age to 21 can be an important step in reducing smoking rates and improving the health of people in Portland. And if such a move is replicated statewide — in similar fashion to Portland’s 1998 ban on smoking in restaurants — the benefits would spread across Maine.