North Adams Board of Health Raises Tobacco-Buying Age to 21

DJ Wilson, top center, gives the Board of Health data on what other municipalities have adopted in regard to tobacco regulations.

By Tammy Daniels iBerkshires Staff
02:30AM / Thursday, April 21, 2016 Print | Email

Dr. Thomas Hyde speaks to the Board of Health on supporting raising the age for purchasing tobacco products as a way to prevent smoking.

NORTH ADAMS, Mass. — Better have your ID ready to buy that pack of cigarettes. Beginning in August, you will have to be age 21 or older to buy tobacco products in the city.

The Board of Health on Wednesday approved the new regulation setting a higher age limit on tobacco sales that
goes into effect on Aug. 1 of this year.

The decision, with only one vote against, was taken after a brief public hearing during which proponents of the regulation pointed to its likely positive effects.

"This is very simple math, what it comes down to," said Dr. Thomas Hyde, a retired pediatrician, in testifying at the hearing. "Raising the minimum tobacco sale age to 21 dramatically reduces tobacco use."

Stores will have to prominently display signage noting the age restriction as well as signage provided by the Board of Health that refers to smoking cessation information. The new regulations also limit the number of tobacco permits in the city to 23 and ban new tobacco retailers within 500 feet of a school; ban single cigar sales and raise the minimum sale price of two or more to $5; limit sales flavored tobacco products and ban the sale of blunts.

The city is just the latest to adopt such regulations to reduce teen smoking. Donald J. Wilson, director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association's tobacco control assistance program, said 105 communities have adopted the 21 sale age, with Needham being the first in instituting it 11 years ago. Teen smoking in Needham dropped by nearly half during that decade.

Fifty-two of the state's 351 communities have also restricted sales of flavored tobacco products and nearly a third have banned blunt wraps and implemented minimum pricing on cigars.

"We do see a good progress with [minimum pricing] because kids, everybody is price sensitive to tobacco purchases, especially kids," he said.

In 2014, Williamstown and Pittsfield also instituted tougher regulations as a deterrent to teen smoking.

North Adams has the highest smoking prevalence in the state, more than double the state average of 15. According to the Tobacco21 group, sales to those between 18 and 21 account for only 2 percent of sales but some 90 percent of smokers start before the age of 21.

Yet smoking is the leading cause of preventable death, said Hyde. "If we stop the chances, if we decrease the chances that you will start to smoke under 21, it has a dramatic effect on how someone will end up smoking for the rest of their life."

Perri Bernstein, youth drug prevention associate with the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, said research has shown that brain development continues until about the age of 25 and that those younger are more likely to be negatively affected by addictive substances.

"Ideally no substances should be used at that point just because of how likely it is to become an addiction," she said.

Corinne Case, a tobacco treatment specialist, said affordable nicotine products, colorful advertising and flavored products evoking candy are all temptations to youngsters.

"The purchasing access to these products is outrageous," she said. "There is no safe cigarette."

City Councilor Joshua Moran also read into the record a resolution supporting the regulations passed by the council last week.

Karl Waltermire of West Package & Variety Stores, also speaking on behalf of Robert West, read a statement saying the regulation was not necessary and that elements of it would be a burden on employees and businesses.

Fines for violations range from $25 to $750 on clerks and permit owners; licenses may also be suspended for up to a year.

"This regulation will put a financial burden on all small retailers in North Adams," he said. "If compliance checks are
showing retailers are doing their job, why penalize the innocent?"

The board, without discussion, voted the new regulations with the minimum age separately. The first vote was unanimous but Chairman Brendan Bullett was the lone vote against the age requirement.

"I think it should be done at the state level," he said afterward. "I don't think it should be done city by city. I've thought that from the beginning."

The Legislature's Joint Committee on Public Health in March reported out a bill to raise the age to 21; it is currently in Ways & Means.

"More and more data is showing how it's working," Hyde said. "It's absolutely the right thing to do for children in our community."