

Portland becomes first community in Maine to raise minimum age to buy tobacco

 pressherald.com/2016/06/20/portland-becomes-first-in-maine-to-raise-minimum-age-to-buy-tobacco/

By Eric Russell Staff Writer erussell@pressherald.com | [@PPHEricRussell](https://twitter.com/PPHEricRussell) | 207-791-6344

June 20, 2016

The city of Portland has become the first community in Maine to raise the minimum age to buy tobacco products from 18 to 21.

The City Council voted unanimously Monday night to [adopt the order sponsored by Councilor Edward Suslovic](#), who chairs the Health and Human Services Committee. The new law will take effect in 30 days.

“My only regret is that we didn’t do this sooner,” Suslovic said before the vote. “I’m not under any illusion that this will prevent everyone from buying tobacco ... but let’s convince our surrounding towns to follow. Let’s show Augusta what real leadership is.”

Several people spoke in favor of the order Monday, including volunteers with the American Cancer Society and two local students.

Carol Kelly, a Portland resident and public relations specialist who has worked for a variety of health-related programs in Maine, including the Maine Coalition on Smoking and Health, commended the council for leading on the issue.

“Tobacco is well-known to be as addictive as heroin,” she said. “And we now know that addiction of all types is a disease of the brain.”

Tiana Urey, who attends Casco Bay High School, urged councilors to “do their part to protect public health.”

Sophie Ray, a soon-to-be freshman at Casco Bay, called the issue “very important,” and said teenage brains are at a crucial point of development that makes them more susceptible to becoming addicted.

No one spoke in opposition, although councilors were presented with a petition that was signed by many convenience store owners whose establishments sell tobacco products.

Ken Nagle, owner of Cigaret Shopper, a smoke shop with 19 locations throughout the state, including two stores in Portland, told the Portland Press Herald in April that the policy is an infringement on personal liberties and is anti-business.

“You have a big government with a liberal agenda. It’s a continuation of that,” he said. “They want to be like New York and other cities around the country that are doing this. Time will tell if that’s good for business or not.”

Portland joins about 135 other communities across the country in increasing the minimum age to buy cigarettes and other tobacco products. Last month, California became the first state to increase the age.

Suslovic said he sees no reason why the state of Maine couldn’t follow Portland’s lead. In 1998, Portland became the first Maine community to ban smoking in restaurants. The state followed the next year.

Under existing state law, a person found guilty of selling tobacco products to anyone younger than 18 may be fined \$50 to \$1,500 plus court fees. Anyone younger than 18 who possesses or uses tobacco may be fined \$100 to \$300 for the first offense and \$200 to \$500 for subsequent offenses.

Suslovic said his message to store owners who oppose the city’s new law is: “Look at CVS. It’s not hurting them. In

fact, they want a bigger store out on Forest Avenue.”

CVS Caremark, the nation’s second-largest pharmacy chain with 7,600 stores, [stopped carrying tobacco products](#) at all locations beginning in February 2014.

In other business Monday, the council voted unanimously to [remove an exclusion for transgender health services](#) in current health coverage for city employees. That measure was widely praised by a number of advocacy groups.

And despite some minor opposition, the council voted 8-1 to [rename the plaza known locally as Lobsterman Park](#), at the corner of Temple and Middle streets, the John E. Menario Plaza, after the former city manager. Councilor Jon Hinck, who cast the lone opposing vote, said he was in an “awkward” position speaking out with Menario in attendance but said he didn’t see a need to change the plaza’s name.

Other councilors said Menario’s impact on the city in the 1960s and ’70s was significant. Councilor Nicholas Mavodones said many of the decisions Menario oversaw during Portland’s Urban Renewal phase “set the stage for the city’s rebirth.”