

St. Louis County looks to raise minimum age for tobacco purchases

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CREVE COEUR • A proposal to bump the minimum age for tobacco purchases to 21 years of age from the current 18 in St. Louis County is about to land on the desk of county lawmakers.

Councilman [Sam Page](#), an anesthesiologist, announced plans to introduce the legislation Monday morning at a [Mercy St. Louis](#) briefing attended by health and medical professionals from across the region.

“The start of the school year is the perfect time to hit the reset button,” Page said. “It is far too easy to purchase tobacco products in St. Louis County.”

If enacted, St. Louis County will join Columbia, Mo., 18 metropolitan Kansas City municipalities and local governments in 12 other states in adopting what is known nationally as “Tobacco 21” or “T21” ordinances.

The age restriction would cover the sale of vape products in addition to cigarettes, cigars and smokeless tobacco.

The T21 legislation in Missouri’s most populous county has the potential to cut into underage cigarette sales in a state that ranks among the top 10 nationally in tobacco use by young people.

A recent survey cited by Page determined that 8 percent of Missouri high school students reported trying cigarettes before the age of 13. The national average is 6.6 percent.

Additional studies have placed tobacco use among Missouri high school students at 17.1 percent compared to 14 percent nationally.

Health experts say Missouri inflates teen smoking rates with the lowest tobacco tax in the U.S.

“The tobacco industry continually loses its customer base because it has a product that kills people,” said Karen Englert, government relations director for the St. Louis area chapter of the [American Heart Association](#). “As a result they need replacement customers — our children.”

Anti-tobacco advocates say hiking the minimum purchase age has had a profound impact on teen smoking rates elsewhere.

In Needham, Mass., teenage tobacco use dropped by 47 percent in the five years after the 21-and-older benchmark took hold, according to an analysis by the [academic researcher, EDC](#).

“Does it eliminate teen smoking?” asked Ginny Chadwick, who while a member of the City Council spearheaded the T21 initiative in Columbia. “No. But this is more effective than any other tobacco prevention program, including raising taxes or quality indoor air ordinances.”

The T21 legislation will mark the second time this year St. Louis County has taken the lead on a health issue.

Led by Page, the County Council in March passed a [prescription drug monitoring program](#) — the first in the state to establish a database that physicians and pharmacies can use to track the distribution of Oxycontin and other opioid painkillers.

Jackson County in June began the process of adopting similar legislation. The policy is under consideration in St.

Louis and other nearby jurisdictions.

Blocked by a legislator who claims the program impedes individual liberties, Missouri alone has yet to enact a statewide tracking system for prescription opioids.

Page said he hopes county adoption of T21 — like the monitoring program — will prompt regional cooperation.

Chadwick acknowledged raising the minimum age for tobacco sales in one jurisdiction to the exclusion of neighboring communities can present a challenge.

But since increasing the age limit in late 2014, Chadwick said Columbia has found “the kids who are already addicted to tobacco products will go across the border to get (cigarettes). But because the products are harder to get, the kids who aren’t addicted won’t bother to drive to the next county.”

The T21 legislation being sought by Page clashes with the council’s reluctance to expand a county indoor smoking ban to the 135 establishments currently exempted.

The unwillingness to force the River City Casino and Hotel in the Lemay area, the Hollywood Casino in Maryland Heights, a handful of bowling alleys and a number of smaller watering holes to abide by the no-smoking rules has drawn fire from anti-tobacco and health activists.

Page on Monday distanced T21 from a three-year delay on expanded smoking ban legislation.

“This fixes a lot of problems,” the Democrat said, acknowledging that “there are other issues out there. But we need to tackle them one at a time.”

Phil Abraham, Washington University pediatrician and chair of the St. Louis Tobacco 21, said Monday the time for addressing teen smoking in St. Louis County and regionally has come.

“Why wait until the next 13-year-old picks up his first cigarette?” Abraham asked.