Cattaraugus Co. to raise tobacco purchasing age

Little Valley, NY (WKBW) -

Lighting up is about to get a lot more difficult for teens in Cattaruagus County. On Wednesday, the county legislature considered a bill that would bump the age to purchase tobacco from 18 to 21. The bill easily passed the legislature.

Students, advocates and doctors call it a big win. They say it will help keep tobacco out of the hands of minors.

"The stores are doing what they are supposed to do. They're not selling to underage people. Where they're getting it from is one of their peers and this law extends that out. So, now the peers in the high schools, the older kids, can't get it to the younger kids. So, they're breaking that tie," said Jon Chaffee of Tobacco Free Western New York.

One high school sophomore says tobacco is everywhere at her school.

"You can see chewing tobacco cans in backs of pockets. You can see cigarettes in backpacks. You can smell nicotine on people," said Abby Proctor of West Valley Central.

One argument against the bill, 18-year-olds could just drive to a neighboring county to buy cigarettes. The county medical director says it still makes sense to raise the age.

"You would think they would just go five miles away and get cigarettes, but they don't. One study in Massachusetts cut the rate in half of smoking in teenagers," said Dr. Gilbert Witte.

Some legislators say this law would limit freedoms to legal adults. They argued if you can defend your country, you should have the right to smoke a cigarette or chew tobacco. The people celebrating this bill, hope it's a step toward making everyone healthier.

For Cattaraugus County the bill still needs to be signed by the county executive.

A similar bill was passed in Chautauqua County earlier this year. That law goes into effect on October 1st.

New York City, Albany County, Cortland County, Schenectedy County, and Suffolk County have already raised the age to purchase tobacco to 21.