

# Normal Enacts Tobacco 21 Ordinance, Short-Term Rental Tax

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Normal has raised the minimum age to buy tobacco and vaping products from 18 to 21.

The town joins the ranks of 26 other Illinois communities with similar laws, including Peoria and Washington. The change goes into effect Dec. 1.

The unanimous council vote Monday night follows a meet-and-greet last month with representatives of the Illinois State University chapter of the Tobacco 21 coalition.

Council members commended students' work advocating for the change, citing their own connections to the issue.

"I'm pleased to see people in that age group standing up and saying, 'We want this, and we want this now,'" said council member Chamberly Cummings. "This was something that kind of hit home personally, knowing those who have passed away from lung disease, from prolonged tobacco usage."

"I think we all had a similar experience that night," said council member R.C. McBride, who is also GLT's general manager. "It was interesting as you talked to (the students), most all of them had gotten involved because they knew someone who'd had lung cancer or something."

"Smoking is what killed my father," McBride continued. "So a lot of us sadly have that in common."

Speaking on the group's behalf at Monday night's council meeting, Patricia Fountain of Normal said while communities with similar laws have seen reduced tobacco use among high schoolers, the rising popularity of e-cigarettes threatens to undo that progress.

Fountain cited a recent statement from FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb calling youth e-cigarette use and nicotine addiction an "epidemic." The statement accompanied the publication of data from the FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2018 National Youth Tobacco Survey, showing that e-cigarette use among high schoolers jumped 78 percent between 2017 and 2018.

Normal resident Charles Sila said while preventing people from taking up smoking is a worthy goal, an ordinance goes too far, restricting the choices of legal adults.

"At age 18, most citizens can buy a house and sign a binding mortgage, or buy a car and sign a binding note without anyone's permission," he said. "Essentially treating some citizens as grade school students is totally unfair."

Council member Kevin McCarthy said with tobacco and other drugs, it's not necessarily about

choice.

“We know what the cigarette industry does is put things in cigarettes that makes them addicting,” he said. “Once kids start, it’s very difficult to get off. It’s not just laziness, it’s not just social pressure, but it is a matter of the chemicals that are put in the cigarettes as well. So I think it’s important that we give them every fighting chance and keep that out of their hands as long as we can.”

Under the ordinance, vendors caught selling tobacco and vaping products to those under 21 face a \$50 fine on the first offense and a \$500 fine for repeat offenses.

City Manager Pamela Reece said Bloomington is expected to consider raising the minimum purchasing age at its next council meeting, though she’s unsure how the council will vote.

### **Short-term rental tax**

The town also unanimously voted to enact a 6 percent “privilege tax” on short-term rentals.

The tax targets properties listed on Airbnb, VRBO, HomeAway and similar sites that have found a foothold in Bloomington-Normal, with the hopes of addressing what traditional hotel operators call an unfair advantage.

The town collects a 6 percent hotel/motel tax, a portion of which funds the Bloomington-Normal Area Convention and Visitor’s Bureau. While Airbnb collects and remits a state tax, it doesn’t generate the same revenue for local governments.

Ray Ceresa of Morton manages the DoubleTree by Hilton in Bloomington. He’s also the president of the Bloomington-Normal Hotel and Lodging Association.

“Short-term rentals are here to stay,” said Ceresa. “They’re growing, and we’re not afraid to compete with them. Our members just want a level playing field.”

Ceresa said Bloomington-Normal recorded the lowest hotel occupancy rates in Illinois this year. Fewer rooms booked means less CVB funding, which means less spending on efforts to bring trade shows, sporting events and others to the area, he said.

The new tax will help ensure the organization can continue its work to expand local tourism and related economic benefits, Ceresa said.

“They attend trade shows, they market the area, they seek out meeting planners and call on them to bring their conventions and events to Bloomington-Normal,” he said. “The CVB also brings in a large number of sporting events in the area. The attendees and the players stay in our hotels, they eat in our restaurants, they shop in our stores.”

Under the new ordinance short-term rental websites like Airbnb will be responsible for collecting and remitting the tax to the town. Someone renting a house via Airbnb for \$100 a night will pay an additional \$6. Town staff estimates the tax will generate around \$6,500 in annual revenues.

McCarthy sits on the CVB board. He said even with the added cost for renters, the short-term rental business should actually benefit from additional revenue and expanded activity for the CVB.

“The more people we can attract, the more visitors, the more sports tournaments ... Airbnb is not unheard of. When people come to communities, particularly for sporting events, they get on Airbnb, they get on the various travel sites and look. I’ve used an Airbnb myself when traveling.”

The tax will go into effect April 1, 2019. Town staff say they’ll begin notifying short-term rental companies active in Normal about the new tax right away. Companies that refuse to collect and remit the tax leave that responsibility to the property owner.

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