

By: MADELINE SHANNON of The News-Times - Updated: 1 month ago Posted Dec 11, 2018

LINCOLN COUNTY -- With at least half of youths saying they have no problem acquiring cigarettes, local officials are considering possible licensing requirements for retailers in Lincoln County.

A proposal to curb tobacco purchases and consumption by Lincoln County youth is making the rounds among public health officials, with members of the county's public health advisory committee strongly supporting the licensure and monitoring of local tobacco retailers here.

"One of the benefits of this is that the penalties are stronger," said Lincoln County Public Health Advisory Committee member Faire Holliday. "What we're seeing in other communities is that fines and the cost of a license might not be enough to make them stop selling or change their ways if they are selling to youth."

Fear of losing a tobacco license, she added, might be motivation enough for many local tobacco retailers to comply with any licensure requirements imposed by the county.

"Especially with stores in which there is a big portion of their revenue, that could help them change their habits so at least they're not selling to youth," Holliday said. "Even if they are still selling products, this does have a couple of other benefits."

According to Holliday, the rate of tobacco use among adults in Lincoln County is among the highest in the state. One in three adults in Lincoln County smoke, and Holliday found that youth smoking, while not as high, is still fairly prevalent. As of the end of November, 7.5 percent of 11th graders smoked cigarettes, 1.9 percent used a tobacco product of some kind and 9 percent smoked e-cigarettes.

"You may have also seen in the news that the use of e-cigarettes is going up sort of exponentially," Holliday said in a December county public health advisory committee meeting. "I think it was 77 percent in the last year, so these numbers are certainly higher over the course of the year."

Holliday also said it's easy for teens to get cigarettes, with 52 percent of 11th graders across the country saying cigarettes are easy to acquire and 57 percent said the same of e-cigarettes. Almost three-quarters of youth who responded to the survey said they got tobacco products from a retail outlet.

"We also know youth obtain it from other youth, so really targeting in on the retail locations, if someone is buying it, can really help reduce the rate," Holliday said.

### **Mixed response to previous proposals**

While numbers weren't immediately available regarding the number of local youth who buy or use tobacco products, Holliday's efforts to target local business that sell cigarettes and similar products will crack down on the retailers selling such merchandise to local teens.

Her proposal would require local businesses to obtain a tobacco-selling license, just as liquor stores, restaurants and grocery stores are required to get a liquor license or dispensaries have to get a license to sell cannabis. The license, once awarded, would not be transferable if the business is sold.

An added benefit of requiring tobacco retailers to sell tobacco products, Holliday added, is that the county would have a way of keeping inventory of which businesses in the area are selling tobacco. The county currently does not keep such a list.

To get a tobacco license, retailers would have to fill out and submit an application and pay a fee which has yet to be determined. Holliday suggests between \$150 and \$400, although in other communities across the state the fee is as low as \$125 annually or as high as \$580 a year.

"The fee has to be enough to cover enforcement, but it can't exceed the cost of the program or else it's considered a tax," Holliday said. "That's something we'd be figuring out on the county level to determine what would be appropriate."

According to chair of the Lincoln County Board of Commissioners, Doug Hunt, the county does not currently impose a fee for the sale of tobacco products. The proposal of regulating and licensing tobacco retailers came before the board of commissioners in years past, with some in the community supporting the effort and some against it.

"It has been discussed before the board of commissioners," Hunt said during the December public health advisory committee meeting. "And as I remember, there was mixed response."

With Lincoln County being one of the highest tobacco-consuming counties in the state, the proposition to license tobacco retailers was met with considerable support from other members of the county's public health advisory committee.

"It would not only be advisable in my mind to have a fee that pays for some sort of monitoring program, but it also is high enough that it would somehow reduce the sales opportunities," said committee chair Gary Lahman. "There may be small retail places that if the fee was too high, they would say, 'Well, I don't want to sell cigarettes.' To me, anytime you reduce the availability of sales, you might reduce usage."