

Should New Jersey raise its smoking age to 21?

Colleges nationwide are banning smoking on campus, but in New Jersey they might not need to.

The state Senate is considering a bill that would raise the legal age for tobacco purchase to 21, which, if passed, would make New Jersey the state with the highest age restrictions on smoking.

New Jersey, where as of 2006 you must be 19 years old to purchase tobacco, is one of four states to have an age limit for smoking over 18. The others are Alabama, Alaska and Utah.

The bill was approved by the state Senate's Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee on June 5 and awaits action on the floor.

Although no states have a smoking age of 21, New York City and Hawaii County, Hawaii raised their smoking ages to 21 last year. Utah and Colorado also have considered similar measures.

The New Jersey bill's age limit would apply to all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes.

In keeping with the current law, the onus for violating the age limit would be placed on the merchant for selling tobacco to a minor, rather than on a minor for purchasing cigarettes or another product.

Advocates of the bill say it will decrease smoking among young people and reduce public health costs related to the dangers of tobacco. Ninety percent of cigarettes purchased for minors are bought by people ages 18 to 20.

"The main benefit is it does a better job of keeping tobacco products out of high schools," says Michael Steinberg, director of the Tobacco Dependence Program at Rutgers University's Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, N.J. "That was the original intention of raising the age of 18 to 19. Raising it to 21 limits high school and younger people's tobacco use."

New Jersey students had mixed reactions to the proposal, with many questioning the feasibility of enforcing the 21+ law.

"I liked when they brought it up to 19 because it prevented teenagers from getting cigarettes, but I think 21 is excessive," says Hunter Woodworth, a 21-year-old junior at Drexel University from Bloomfield, N.J. "If they're going to smoke cigarettes, they're going to whether it's legal or not."

"If the intent is to prevent people from smoking early or altogether, I'd be for it," says Silas Kezengwa, a 20-year-old junior at Montclair State University in Montclair, N.J. "However, I believe changing the minimum age wouldn't make much of an impact. I expect people who are interested in smoking would find ways to get their hands on cigarettes as underage drinkers do

with alcohol.”

Hunter Main, a rising senior at Georgetown University from Titusville, N.J., points out that high school students who use false identification to purchase cigarettes already use IDs that say they are 21, so a change in law would not necessarily affect them.

“When I was 17 or 18, if I wanted to get a pack, I could get a pack somehow,” says Steve Melone, a 22-year-old senior at Montclair State.

Melone, who says he smokes occasionally, thinks he might have smoked slightly less as a freshman in college if the legal age had been 21.

“It makes you work harder to get something you want to get,” he says.

To questions of enforcement, Steinberg has a simple response.

“You’re never going to have 100% enforcement, and I think that’s OK,” Steinberg says. “We don’t have 100% enforcement of our seat-belt law, and most people still think it’s a good idea.”

Other students see the proposal as a solely positive development.

“I think it’s smart for the age to be raised because tobacco causes many more health problems than alcohol does. Because both are harmful substances, it makes more sense to have the same legal age requirement,” says Tyler Winther, an 18-year-old rising freshman at George Washington University from Glen Ridge, N.J.

Steinberg emphasizes the dangers of tobacco over alcohol, and the need to impose age limits on par with those realities.

“Tobacco products are the most addictive substance in our society,” he says. “Before an 18-year-old or 19-year-old make the decision to start smoking that may result in being a lifelong smoker, we want that person to be as informed to make that decision as possible. Giving someone an extra three years of life experience and information to make this decision makes good sense.”

As the bill awaits a Senate vote, Steinberg is hopeful.

“I’m cautiously optimistic that New Jersey will see the wisdom of New York City and follow in its footsteps,” he says.

Emma Hinchliffe is a rising senior at Georgetown University

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