

Englewood raises legal age for tobacco to 21

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Want to buy a pack of smokes in Englewood? If you're under 21, you'll have to leave the city to get your fix.

Englewood has become the first municipality in the state to raise the minimum age for sales of tobacco and "nicotine delivery" products — cigarettes, cigars and e-cigarettes — to 21, according to a state anti-smoking group that tracks new legislation.

"The longer we can keep kids away from these products ... I think the better off everybody is," said City Council President Lynne Algrant.

Englewood joins a growing list of municipalities and counties around the nation that have sought to keep cigarettes out of the hands of their young people. New York City raised the minimum age to buy cigarettes and other tobacco products to 21 last year. A similar ban will go into effect in Suffolk County on Long Island in January. And at least a dozen towns in Massachusetts as well as a county in Hawaii also prohibit the sale of tobacco products to individuals younger than 21, according to Karen Blumenfeld, the executive director of Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy.

And the state of New Jersey could soon join their ranks if a bill making its way through the Legislature is adopted.

The bill, which would ban the sale of tobacco products and electronic smoking devices to anyone under 21, was approved by the Senate in June. The Assembly version — sponsored by Valerie Vainieri Huttie, wife of Englewood Mayor Frank Huttie III — has yet to be voted on.

If the measure becomes law, it would make New Jersey the first state to raise the legal age to buy cigarettes to 21, according to Dr. Fred Jacobs, who was the state's health commissioner in 2006, when the legal age to buy cigarettes in New Jersey was raised from 18, to 19.

That could be important in the fight against tobacco use. Most smokers start when they're young, before their 21st birthdays, Jacobs said. He and other anti-smoking advocates hope that by cutting off young adults' access to cigarettes and other tobacco products, fewer will be tempted to pick up the habit.

“Every kid who doesn’t start is a kid who later in life doesn’t have to stop,” he said.

Nearly 16 percent of all high-school students and 4.5 percent of all eighth-graders smoke, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And studies show that those who start early don’t stop; the CDC reports that more than a third of all children who try smoking become regular, daily smokers before leaving high school.

Retailers violating the provisions of Englewood’s new ordinance risk a fine of up to \$250 for the first offense and fines up to \$1,000, 90 days in jail and suspension of their retail-food licenses for a third or any subsequent offenses committed in one year. The law takes effect next week.

In addition to its new ban on tobacco sales to young people, the City Council also took steps recently to make its public areas smoke free. The council last week banned smoking in all public buildings and on public property, including parks and recreation areas.

“There are a lot of kids out here starting to smoke at a young age. They think smoking is cool,” Bronx teenager Travis Torres said during a visit to Englewood on Thursday afternoon.

“Everyone around here smokes,” added his friend, Lloyd Mitchell, 17, of Delaware, who has family in Englewood. “They don’t care. Mostly it’s to impress people older than them.”

Both teenagers said that they don’t smoke and that raising the minimum purchase age was a good idea.

But 69-year-old Carl Amos of Teaneck, sitting outside a West Palisade Avenue salon on Thursday, had a very different take on the matter.

“Once they can serve their country, they should be able to do what grown folk do,” said Amos, a Vietnam War veteran and former smoker. “If I can fight for this country, I should be able to smoke.”

His 71-year-old friend agreed. F. Lee, who declined to give his full name or hometown, said he started smoking when he was 12 or 13.

“It’s up to the individual,” said Lee, who also served in the Vietnam War. “If you’re old enough to die, you should be able to drink and smoke.”

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