



Legal age to buy cigarettes, tobacco products in Suffolk raised to 21 on Jan. 1

New legislation banning the sale of tobacco products, e-cigarettes, and liquid nicotine to anyone under 21 in Suffolk County took effect today. Prior to today, it had been illegal to sell these products to anyone under 19.

In addition, since 2009, it has been illegal to use e-cigarettes and similar products in public places where traditional forms of smoking are banned; anyone in violation can be fined a minimum of \$300.

Vendors will be contacted when new 2015 Tobacco 21 signage signs are available at county offices but, in the meantime, can find a temporary copy of the signage by visiting the Suffolk County Government [website](#).

Classes will be given free to those trying to kick the smoking habit. Suffolk County's "Learn to Be . . .Tobacco Free" program is supervised by a nurse practitioner.

Classes will be given in Babylon, Center Moriches, Bay Shore, Greenlawn and Coram. For additional information, call 631-853-4017.

In March, after a marathon session of the Suffolk County Legislature that lasted until after 1:30 a.m. in Hauppauge, the measure to raise the legal age from 19 to 21 to buy cigarettes and other tobacco items passed in a close vote.

Suffolk County Legislator Al Krupski, (D-Cutchogue) voted in favor of the legislation.

"I supported it," he said. "All the scientific information supports that cigarette addiction starts predominantly at an early age. If you can keep cigarettes out of the hands of children, it automatically helps all of society. It's less of a health problem going forward. And this is something we all pay for, financially and socially. If someone we love dies, it's a huge quality of life issue. They do not die a quick death."

At the March 3 public hearing, scores of passionate speakers stated their points of view on the controversial issue, which also had members of the legislature sharply divided.

Speakers came from every walk of life, ranging in age from teens to former longtime smokers, from business owners who said their bottom lines would be deeply impacted by the loss of sales as smokers headed to the black market, to

physicians who painted grim pictures of the statistics that indicate the lethal dangers of smoking.

New York City already raised the age to buy cigarettes to the age of 21 in October. A previous hearing on the issue was held at the Suffolk County Legislature in February.

Matt Harris, a former smoker from Huntington Station, said he quit smoking over 20 years ago. "It was one of the hardest things I ever did," he said. Still, Harris was diagnosed with throat cancer one year ago.

Today, Harris, although cancer free, warned of the dire impacts of addiction to cigarettes at a young age. "Suffolk County has been at the forefront of legislation," he said. "I'm urging this county legislature to save some lives. There are a lot of high school kids out there that still think smoking is cool. If you have to be 21 to drink, you should have to be 21 to smoke."

Experts chimed in on the merits of the bill. Patricia Bishop-Kelly of the Suffolk County Board of Health read a letter from Dr. Andrew Hyland, chair of the department of health at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo. She said raising the minimum age would decrease access to cigarettes to kids under 18; most kids who purchase cigarettes for their younger friends, she said, are under 21 themselves.

Bishop-Kelly said Hyland pointed to Needham, Mass., which raised its smoking age to 21 in 2005, and where youth smoking had shown a dramatic decline, averaging 56 percent in middle school and 70 percent at the high school level, since the age hike.

"Of the argument that this bill is taking government intervention too far, it's necessary for government to intervene for an initiative that will improve public health," she said.

James Kelly of Huntington Station entered written testimony from Kevin O'Flaherty of the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids into the record. According to statistics, Kelly said, 95 percent of adult smokers begin before the age of 21, and 80 percent light their first smoke before the age of 18.

Legislator William Spencer (D-Centerport), a physician and sponsor of the bill, pointed to the long-term costs to the public of smoking, and to the toll on lives lost.

Michael Seilback of the American Lung Association pointed to the staggering health care costs nationally, a number he said is in the billions, due to smoking and said tobacco use remains the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. "We know that nearly 1,000 kids under 18 become daily smokers every day and one third will die from this product," he said. The Surgeon

General, he added, has said 5.6 million individuals will die prematurely due to tobacco use.

In addition, Seilback said, the human brain at ages 18 to 21 is more susceptible to the “addictive nature” of nicotine. “Tobacco kills one of three, when used as directed.”

Legislator John Kennedy (R-Hauppauge), stood firm on his belief that individuals old enough to serve the nation at war should be old enough to make their own decisions about smoking. Also, he said, “I can walk into a liquor store and buy a fifth of alcohol, and it will put you in a grave, but it is legal.” Kennedy also said he believes the initiative will never be enforceable.

“You have to be 21 to buy liquor. This absolutely affects people’s health, especially children,” Legislator Sarah Anker (D-Mount Sinai) said.

Legislator Kate Browning (WF-Shirley), said she had concerns about smokers coming to the two Indian reservations in Suffolk County to buy cigarettes. As a military wife and mother, she said raised the issue of government intervention. “We can force someone to go to a military draft, as they did in Vietnam, but they can’t buy a cigarette? Government can’t go on trying to control people’s lives.”

Business owners spoke out fiercely against the measure, which they said would deeply impact their bottom line. Michael Watt of the Long Island Gasoline Retailers Association, which as over 600 members across Suffolk County, said raising the age to 21 would drive more smokers to the black market and to the reservations, where the laws are “virtually unenforceable.”

The black market is already a challenge, he said, with 60 percent of cigarettes smuggled in. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, or ATF, said the “number one black market commodity” remains cigarettes, Watt said. He added that he would have no issue with a statewide measure to raise the age to 21. “As long as it’s a level playing field,” he said.

Jack Rugan, vice president of the United Franchise Owners of Long Island said the measure would be just another burden on “law-abiding cigarette retailers. These are young adults. You cannot legislate individual freedoms and morality.”

Legislator Tom Cilmi (R-East Islip), suggested that with the county standing to lose \$4.25 million in sales tax revenue, one alternative might be to segregate those funds and use them toward tobacco education; raising the age to 21, he said, could diminish the county’s capacity to provide funding for such programs.

Other speakers said they believe a multi-pronged approach, with the raised age to 21 coupled with education.

Andrea Nydegger, a social worker at Eastern Suffolk BOCES who works in the Mattituck School District, said she is most concerned about electronic cigarettes, used to vaporize liquid nicotine, which she said are on the rise.

"The amount of kids using electronic cigarettes is very rampant," she said.

Nydegger brought students, who spoke up about what the dangers they see firsthand at their school.

Mattituck student Brittney Longley said she has seen an increase in electronic cigarettes, even on the school bus; she said a smokers' corner exists right near the school.

"I think getting to the source of it would help decrease a lot of the problem," Longley said.

<http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2014/03/19/report-suffolk-county-lawmakers-vote-to-raise-tobacco-purchase-age-to-21/>