

Times of Trenton Editorial Board

Editorial: Princeton proposal to increase age for tobacco sales to 21 is healthy move

By **Times of Trenton Editorial Board**
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In March 2013, **Princeton made history by becoming the first municipality in Mercer County to ban smoking on town property** - parks, pools and town-owned recreation areas, not to mention municipal buildings.

Now Princeton is again taking aim at tobacco sales. The township's board of health is weighing an **ordinance that would ban the sale of sale of tobacco and electronic cigarettes to anyone under 21.**

It's a gutsy move. Sayreville, Teaneck and Englewood have already gone in this direction, and we hope other communities listen up.

In December, the National Institute on Drug Abuse issued some good news: A report indicated that the use of tobacco had fallen 8 percent the previous month among 8th, 10th and 12th graders in a survey of nearly 50,000 young people.

The news here at home was less rosy. The Executive Director of Summit-based Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy said state figures had not declined, and the New Jersey Department of Health said **13.6** of the state's high school students had smoked in the previous 30 days.

The sad reality, says Princeton Councilwoman Heather Howard, is that about 90 percent of smokers have their first cigarette before they turn 21.

These numbers are just numbers until you consider the estimated 480,000 people who die of lung cancer every year. Then the cold statistics become real-life mothers, fathers, sons and daughters whose lifetime addictions cost them their lives.

We know it's easier not to start smoking in the first place than to stop. That's why limiting tobacco sales to people over 21 is a positive public-health initiative.

New Jersey is already one of five states to set a minimum age of 19 for such sales. A bill pending in the Legislature would make us the first state to raise that legal age to 21. That, too, would be a laudable move. Whenever these measures surface, you hear the usual concerns about creating a "nanny state." If people want to start smoking at the age of 15, comes the inevitable whine, they should be able to. It's their right.

To which we say, sure it's everyone's right to inhale toxins, but it's the rest of society that pays the price - their loved ones, the health system, and anyone forced to inhale second-hand or even third-hand smoke.

Moreover, the teenaged brain is far from fully formed, making teens and adolescents prone to rash and often disastrous decisions - like taking the first cigarette.

We applaud Princeton for taking this step toward a healthier populace, making that first puff just a little harder to come by.

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