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Advocates push to raise smoking age to 21 in Rhode Island

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Anti-smoking advocates turned out at the State House on Wednesday to testify in support of a bill that would make Rhode Island the first state in the nation to raise the legal age for tobacco purchases to 21.

They also spoke in favor of two other bills, one that would regulate hookah bars, where patrons gather to smoke from communal pipes, and another that would require liquids made for e-cigarettes to be packaged in child-proof containers.

Although a handful of municipalities, including New York City and many communities in Massachusetts, have raised the legal age for tobacco to 21, no state has done so. In a few states, the legal age is 19. Tobacco control advocates seek the higher age to prevent young people from becoming addicted to nicotine products and driving up the nation's health-care costs.

The data is staggering," said Rep. Teresa Tanzi, D-Narragansett and South Kingstown, the bill's sponsor. She said that studies have shown that smoking rates among those 18 to 21 have fallen dramatically in communities that raised the legal age.

Patricia Markham Risica, a Brown University professor and a member of the Rhode Island Public Health Association, said this age span is "when many smokers transition to regular smokers" and that "marketers are very well aware" of that.

Karina Holyoak Wood, director of public policy for the American Lung Association in Rhode Island, said studies have shown that close to 90 percent of adult smokers begin before they turn 21.

Nearly a dozen people opposed the bill. They included convenience store owners who said their businesses would be hurt by the loss of sales and by customers going over state lines to not only buy cigarettes but also other items such as lottery tickets and milk.

Purveyors of smokeless nicotine products said their businesses, too, would be adversely affected. They added that people under 21 who use e-cigarettes to quit smoking would no longer be able to do so.

Quite a few remarked that after turning 18, people should have the right to make their own decisions, especially if they are old enough to vote and go to war. And unlike alcohol, smoking doesn't put others' lives at risk, only their own, they said.

The bill regarding hookah establishments would address a legal exemption they enjoy from a ban on indoor smoking that was originally intended for cigar bars, said Tanzi.

Her legislation would require all smoking bars to register with the Division of Taxation and to file quarterly reports demonstrating that at least half of their revenues come from tobacco products. She said most hookah bars serve plenty of food and drinks.

The bill regarding e-cigarette products was sponsored by Rep. Helio Melo, D-East Providence, on behalf of Attorney General Peter Kilmartin.

Melo said the bill would require that the liquids used in e-cigarettes, often marketed in sweet flavors attractive to youths, be sold in child-proof packaging.

"The majority are already complying with this," said Melo, so "it would be of minimal to no disruption in services to these businesses."

The bill would also prohibit vaping liquids in schools.

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