

Non-profit aims to raise age for tobacco purchase in Fort Lee to 21

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FORT LEE – Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy, the non-profit that spearheaded an effort to ban smoking in the borough's public parks and facilities last year, is hoping to meet similar success with a new initiative now before the governing body: raising the purchasing age for tobacco products from 19 to 21.

The "tobacco 21" proposal, first adopted into law by Englewood last summer and now in 11 other New Jersey municipalities including Tenafly, Teaneck, Bergenfield, Bogota and Westwood, aims to lower youth smoking rates, reduce the state's annual \$3 billion healthcare expenses on smoking-related illnesses and save lives.

Ninety percent of adult smokers start before they turn 21, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Edgewater and Paramus toyed with adopting a tobacco 21 ordinance this summer but tabled it due to concerns over preemption, fearing risk of a lawsuit from the state. In 2006, New Jersey set the minimum age to purchase tobacco products and electronic smoking devices at 19.

Karen Blumenfeld, GASP's executive director, sought to curb similar worries at a meeting with the Fort Lee mayor and council earlier this month, noting that none of the towns with tobacco 21 laws have been sued and that the New Jersey Office of Legislative Services issued a memo last month stating a municipality "would not be prohibited from establishing a higher minimum age for the lawful sale of tobacco within its boundaries."

Council members also raised concerns about overstepping their authority by "protecting people against themselves" and wondered if the task was a better fit for the Board of Health.

Councilman Joseph Cervieri said he felt uncomfortable with a soldier under the drinking age coming to Fort Lee and being unable to buy a cigarette.

"You can put your life down for the country but you can't buy a pack of cigarettes? That's depriving them of their right to their freedom," he said.

Blumenfeld and anti-smoking activist James Erwin argued that cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and other smoking-related illnesses are among the top reasons veterans are admitted to hospitals and urged the governing body to not leave the tobacco 21 law up for a public vote, as suggested by Councilman Peter Suh, or pass it on to the Board of Health.

"You are here to protect people, this is something that protects everyone," said Erwin.

Mayor Mark Sokolich said he personally believed the decision to pursue the law rested with the governing body and that it was "an important issue that needs to have continuing consideration."

Tobacco 21 started in Massachusetts about ten years ago and has since spread to New York City, Suffolk County in New York and Hawaii.

<http://www.northjersey.com/community-news/non-profit-aims-to-raise-age-for-tobacco-purchase-to-21-1.1434077>