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Paterson raises age for cigarette purchases to 21

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BY JOE MALINCONICO

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PATERSON — The minimum age for buying cigarettes in Paterson will rise from 19 to 21 under a resolution adopted by the City Council this week.

The regulation, which will take effect in November, covers tobacco, electronic cigarettes and other smoking products. The minimum fine for a business caught selling any of the restricted items to someone younger than 21 will be \$250.

New Jersey law sets 19 as the minimum age for tobacco purchases, according to Paterson's health and human services director Donna Nelson-Ivy. But she said a bill pending in the legislature would raise the age to 21 statewide.

Advocates said the measure would protect young people in Paterson. "Let's think about our children and do the right thing," said community activist Waheeda Mohammed.

But Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association, told the council that 19- and 20-year-olds from Paterson simply would go to neighboring towns to buy cigarettes. He said the measure would put businesses in the city at a disadvantage compared to rivals in other towns.

Risalvato also questioned the fairness of a law that allows 19- and 20-year-olds to join the military and die for their country but not to buy cigarettes.

The council voted 7-1 in favor of the new regulation. Councilman Julio Tavaréz, who cast the only negative vote, questioned the statistics cited by advocates of the measure, including data on the ages at which youths start smoking.

Tavaréz said his research revealed that the vast majority of young smokers pick up the habit before they reach 18. He said restricting purchases for 19- and 20-year-olds would not solve the problem of teenage smoking.

Tavaréz also pointed out that several advocates of the new regulation cited the illegal sales of loose cigarettes as the basis for their support. "You are doing nothing to fix that problem," Tavaréz said.

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