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Should legal age to buy cigarettes in N.J. be raised to 21?

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TRENTON — More than eight million packs of cigarettes are sold each year in New Jersey to young adults who are 19 and 20 years old — an age, health experts say, when casual smokers are most likely to become addicted for life.

Public health advocates will urge members of the state Assembly Health and Senior Services Committee on Thursday to approve a bill that would raise the legal age to buy cigarettes in New Jersey from 19 to 21 to protect their health.

But the legislation also eliminates \$19 million in tax revenues for the state in the first year, according to the nonpartisan Office of Legislative Affairs. The bill's chief opponent, the Gasoline-Convenience Store-Automotive Association, wants lawmakers to realize why the state would be giving up if they pass this "feel good" legislation.

"My members know their customers, and they have no reason to believe that this legislation will keep anyone from smoking," said Sal Risalvato, the association's executive director. "Their concern is that the only thing it will do is drive less people into their stores, which will result in lost profits because less customers means lost allied sales of things like coffee and chips and snacks."

"This legislation has a big price tag for little accomplishment. I believe it to be nothing more than 'feel good' legislation," Risalvato added. "I don't think that folks should smoke either, but why hurt small businesses to accomplish nothing?"

The \$19 million in lost tax revenue is based on statistics that say 8.2 million packs of cigarettes are bought by people 19 and 20 years old every year. The

loss of revenue will diminish over time as sales decline, according to the analysis.

Risalvato has a scheduling conflict and said he won't be able to make the hearing at the Statehouse.

Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy, or GASP, the bill's chief proponent, said she will testify about the medical evidence that shows the how 90 percent of all tobacco users start before the age of 21.

"According to the U.S. Surgeon General, nearly half of adult smokers transition to regular, daily smoking before age 18," according to a report Blumenfeld will share with the committee. "More than three-quarters transition to regular, daily smoking before they turn 21."

Vendors who sell to young adults under 21 would pay \$500 for the first offense and \$1,000 for subsequent offenses, [according to the bill](#).

She noted that 15 towns have passed "tobacco 21" laws in a little over a year.

"It makes sense to have a state law that helps reduce smoking by young people," Blumenfeld said. "New York City's law is in effect for several years already."

The bill, (A3254), is one of many bill the Democratically controlled legislature is trying to approve before the two-year session ends on Jan. 11. The Senate [approved the legislation 18 months ago](#).

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