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Christie's veto leaves New Jersey's smoking age at 19

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TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Gov. Chris Christie decided not to act Tuesday on a bill that would have boosted New Jersey's smoking age to 21, keeping the age to buy tobacco products at 19.

The bill, which passed the Democrat-led Legislature amid a surge in lobbying from the tobacco industry, would have fined retailers up to \$1,000 if they sold cigarettes or other tobacco products, including e-cigarettes that are also known as "vapes," to anyone 20 years old or younger. Underage smokers would have gone unpunished.

The Republican governor's office avoided specific mention of the smoking bill but blamed the Legislature for hastily sending him more than 100 bills, "praying for them to be rubber stamped." His office also cited Christie's signature of a bill that will ban the sale of liquid nicotine for electronic cigarettes unless they're in a child resistant container.

"We could have made New Jersey a leader, becoming just the second state to raise the age to 21, a move that is supported by an overwhelming majority of the public," said Valerie Vainieri Huttel, D-Bergen, who was lead sponsor of the bill in the Assembly. "Instead, the governor is playing right into the hands of the tobacco industry, which prizes this key demographic."

Christie's position on smoking has been somewhat enigmatic. While campaigning for president, a talk he gave about addiction started with a story about his mother who "was addicted to nicotine" and eventually diagnosed with lung cancer. A video of it has been viewed online more than 8 million times.

But in 2014, the Republican presidential candidate also vetoed a bill that passed with overwhelming support to extend a smoking ban to parks and public beaches, saying local municipalities should be able to decide.

Advocates hoped that New Jersey would be the tipping point for a policy that so far has taken hold only in Hawaii and in cities including New York and Boston. Similar measures have been introduced in eight other states and the District of Columbia. Federal lawmakers have also proposed a nationwide smoking age of 21.

Since 2013, when New Jersey's smoking age bill was first introduced, tobacco companies have given nearly \$600,000 to state lawmakers of both political parties, an increase of more than 50 percent over the previous three years, according to campaign finance records.

The New Jersey lobbyist for Philip Morris, which owns popular brands such as Marlboro, uses the Princeton Public Affairs Group. Its founder is Dale Florio, a former Philip Morris lobbyist who also served as a finance committee member on Christie's gubernatorial campaign. Florio did not immediately return a phone call seeking comment.

Christie also oversaw the raising of more than \$1 million from Morris and R.J. Reynolds when he chaired the Republican Governors Association in 2014, according to Internal Revenue Service documents. (The companies gave the Democratic Governors Association more than \$300,000 that same year.)

Rob Crane, president of the Ohio-based Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation, which supported the legislation, called Christie a hypocrite for citing the struggles of his mother and then veto a bipartisan bill.

"It is the height of hypocrisy to buoy one's campaign recounting his mother's fatal addiction to nicotine, and with millions of Facebook video views about his friend's losing battle with addiction, then veto a bipartisan bill that is New Jersey's best chance to keep thousands of adolescents away from addiction and death," Crane said.

Bills to raise the smoking age have faced opposition from veterans groups who've said service members who risked their lives on the battlefield should have the right to choose to smoke. In New Jersey, restaurant groups and the electronic cigarette community had urged an Assembly committee to drop the bill last year, citing concerns about losing business and smoker's rights.

"Concerning vapor products, 19 and 20 year old adult smokers deserve the opportunity to quit smoking, and this bill would have immediately barred them from purchasing a far lower risk alternative," said Gregory Conley, president of the Medford, New Jersey-based American Vaping Association.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/8954a56616294d72a2148576e969a889/christies-veto-leaves-new-jerseys-smoking-age-19>