

NEW YORK

Hookah Bars May Soon Be a Lot Tougher to Find

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By Samuel Lieberman

Several New York City Council members have decided that allowing tobaccoless hookah smoking in bars is a loophole in the city's smoking ban, and they want to stop it. On Thursday, Councilmember Ydanis A. Rodriguez introduced legislation that would prohibit anyone under 21 from smoking shisha, and ban its sale from anywhere besides hookah bars, tobacco bars, and tobacco stores. Rodriguez's bill would also limit the sale of rolling papers and hookah pipes to those over 21.

Shisha is generally a mix of tobacco, molasses, and a vegetable sweetener. It is available in a variety of fruity flavors, as well as chocolate and weed (obviously). However, it is also made in a tobacco-free, nicotine-free herbal form, and that's the stuff New York hookah bars offer to get around the Smoke Free Air Act. (A 2014 sting operation by the health department busted 13 hookah bars that had been spicing their hookahs with tobacco.) Tobacco-based shisha is already banned from our lounges and bars, and the CDC says it's about as bad for you as cigarettes are, despite the filtering aspects of the water pipe. Tobacco-free shisha may give the impression that it's safer, but its combustion products, particularly from the charcoal used to spark it up, aren't so good either.

Councilmember Vincent J. Gentile is pushing for a related ban on new hookah lounges. The legislation would grandfather in current hookah-heavy joints, as long as they make half their revenue from fruity smokables. They'd also only be allowed to offer hookahs at 5 percent of their tables, a proposal that hookah bar owners called out as a contradiction.

Councilmember Antonio Reynoso argues that expanding the ban would slash the customer base of a lot of small businesses. He said that people who do not want to smoke or be around hookah just don't go to hookah bars. Also, he accused the council of selective concern. "I dare this Council to speak to the risk of alcohol," said Reynoso. "We're not having a conversation about shutting down bars because of alcohol, and those health risks are much more obvious."

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