



North Plainfield Moves Step Closer to Raising Legal Smoking Age



By VICTORIA CARUSO
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NORTH PLAINFIELD, NJ – North Plainfield is a step closer to becoming the first Somerset County municipality to raise the legal smoking age. At a June 8 meeting, the North Plainfield Borough Council voted 4-2 in favor of a Council President Doug Singleterry's ordinance to prohibit the sale of tobacco and other nicotine related products within the borough to persons under 21 years old. The ordinance must be approved upon its second reading at a meeting later this month for it to pass.

At Monday's meeting, Singleterry along with Councilmembers Everett Merrill, Keiona Miller and Frank Righetti voted in favor of the ordinance while Council President Larry LaRonde and Councilwoman Wendy Schaefer voted against it; Councilman Frank 'Skip' Stabile was not present for the meeting but indicated he would be in favor of the ordinance. Mayor Michael Giordano, Jr., however, has publically stated he will not sign or support the ordinance in its current form.

Under the ordinance, the sale of tobacco and other nicotine related products to persons under 21 years old within the borough would be prohibited. Currently, the legal smoking age in North Plainfield and throughout much of the state is 19, however, eight other municipalities throughout New Jersey have, over the past few years, banned tobacco sales to individuals under 21 years old.

Proponents state that raising the legal smoking age to 21 would significantly reduce the overall percentage of smokers and therefore save more lives and lower health issues. According to the [American Lung Association](#), 85 percent of people who smoke regularly started smoking under the age of 21 and study by the Institute of Medicine found that increasing the smoking age to 21 would reduce smoking by 12 percent, resulting in 249,000 fewer premature deaths, 45,000 fewer lung cancer deaths and 4.2 million fewer years of life lose between those born between 2000 and 2019.

Cara Murphy, a program and policy attorney with Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy (New Jersey GASP) – a 40-year-old Summit-based non-profit organization with a mission of promoting smoke-free air and tobacco-free lives – addressed the council Monday night and spoke in favor of the ordinance. “The health impacts that would be made by the adoption of this ordinance are so great,” said Murphy. “We thank you for considering this ordinance.”

Last June, bills sponsored by Senators Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex) and Richard J. Codey (D-Essex) to raise the legal age to 21 passed the Senate by a vote of 22 to 10; the legislation is currently before the Assembly's Health and Senior Services Committee and Singleterry feels that as more and more municipalities passed similar ordinances, the state would likely move forward as well.

“The overwhelming majority of people who smoke start under the age of 21 and raising the smoking age would help reduce smoking by 12 percent. It has been proven that having a smoking age of 19 is much less effective,” said Singleterry. “I think the reasons for the ordinance are have been stated and can speak for themselves.”

Opponents, however, feel that since the ordinance would be limited solely to North Plainfield – at least at this point in time – ‘underage’ smokers would only have to travel minutes away to a neighboring town to make their purchases, ultimately having a negative financial affect on borough businesses.

“I am not in favor of this resolution. Although I totally agree with all the health issues and there is no doubt that stopping smoking would be great, I still feel we have an obligation to our businesses” said La Ronde, adding, “My recommendation to this council is to reject this resolution on the second reading, wait to see if the state decides to do it and then everybody gets on even playing ground.”

Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline-Convenience-Automobile Association (NJGCA), urged the board not to pass the ordinance, stating it would be ‘burdensome to the small businesses owners’ in North Plainfield and could cost them sales and put them in potential penalty situations. “This isn’t going to deter or stop those sales because those customers will simply move on to another town to [make their] purchases,” Risalvato said, adding that, unlike the underage sale of alcohol, the proposed ordinance only affects the business owner. “It doesn’t accomplish what you are truly trying to do and that is not have people to smoke. This will penalize only the local business owner [and] I ask you to please reconsider and please reject this ordinance.”

Murphy, however, testified that in Massachusetts dozens of towns have successfully raised the smoking age to 21, including Needham, MA, which did so 10 years ago with no negative outcome. “No tobacco retailer has gone out of businesses since they adopted ordinances in 2005,” Murphy said. “The town has been able to successfully implement this policy without any kind of negative impact on the tobacco retailers ... Many of these retailers also serve other products so the disposal income previously spent on tobacco can be spent on other products as well.”

North Plainfield resident Tracy Peters and Frank D’Amore, Sr. also expressed their opposition to the ordinance, with D’Amore calling it a ‘farce.’

“If anyone in government – whether it be municipal, county state or federal – was truly serious about the dangers the sale and possession of tobacco and tobacco-related products would be prohibited,” said D’Amore. “Since I don’t see that happening anything that happens until [then] is nothing more than a joke,”

Additionally, Mayor Giordano also believes raising the smoking age in the borough will hurt some of the small businesses and feels the ordinance, in its current form, isn't fair to members of the military who, under the age of 21, would be allowed to serve this country but denied the right to purchase cigarettes.

Both Risalvato and La Ronde also feel 'underage' members of the military will be affected. "I served this country and if I was old enough to die for this country I should be old enough to have a cigarette..." La Ronde said.

Risalvato added, "Our military is included in this age group and I ask yourself to put yourself in the position of the store owner or that person at the cash register when that military person steps forward to purchase a pack of cigarettes or any other tobacco product and he is not 21. What is the discomfort with denying that soldier the ability to make that purchase?"

The cigarette ordinance will be up for a second reading and final vote at the North Plainfield Borough Council's June 22 meeting.

Although he understands that the ordinance would put North Plainfield a step ahead of what the state is eventually going to do, La Ronde believes the borough should wait for the state to change the law.