

Raising age to buy cigarettes to 21 gaining momentum in NJ, elsewhere

Dave Hutchinson | July 08, 2015



Hawaii is the first state to ban tobacco sales, including electronic smoking devices, to anyone under 21 years old. The law takes effect on Jan. 1, 2016.

Although North Plainfield recently voted down an ordinance to raise the age to buy [tobacco products from 19 to 21](#), the measure is gaining momentum locally and elsewhere, said Sen. Richard Codey, who has co-sponsored a bill in the Senate to raise the age to 21 state-wide.

"Old man 'mo' is with us," Codey said, referring to momentum.

Rutherford introduced [an ordinance last month to ban tobacco sales](#), including electronic smoking devices, to anyone under 21. The measure will come up for a vote by the town council on July 13.

Currently, eight municipalities in the state have raised the age to 21: Bogota, East Rutherford, Englewood, Garfield, [Highland Park](#), [Princeton](#), Sayreville and Teaneck. [The bill in the state Senate](#) is before the Health and Senior Services Committee in the state assembly after being approved by the [state Senate committee in June](#).

"I spoke to the speaker (Vincent Prieto) and I feel confident about our chances of getting it passed," said Codey (D-Essex), who co-sponsored the bill with Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex). "I'm hoping by the end of the year.

"We have all these towns coming in and saying it's the right thing to do. When I was governor, I raised the age from 18 to 19 (in 2006). Since then, the number of people dying in smoking-related deaths is down and more importantly, the number of people adopting smoking is down."

Codey said if the bill is passed, the state will save millions of dollars that are currently being spent caring for people suffering from smoking-related illnesses.

The push to raise the age to 21 is turning into a national trend, said Karen Blumenfeld, executive director for Global Advisory on Smoke-free Policy, a Summit-based anti-smoking group.

Hawaii recently became the first state to raise the age to 21 and eight other states, including NJ, have introduced legislation on the state level to raise the age to 21 to purchase tobacco products.

Blumenfeld cited the growing state-wide movements to raise the age to 21 in Massachusetts, where nearly two dozens municipalities have raised the age to 21, and in California, where the Senate passed a bill in June and it awaits posting in the Assembly.

Currently, NJ is one of only five states to have set the minimum age at 19 to purchase tobacco products. Alabama, Alaska, Massachusetts and Utah are the others. The minimum age in the other states is 18.

In North Plainfield, council president Lawrence La Ronde voted against raising the age to 21, saying it would hurt local business. He said he would be in favor of the measure as long as it's state wide.

"I didn't think it was fair to the businesses in North Plainfield because all somebody has to do is walk across the town line to purchase cigarettes," La Ronde said last month when the measure [was defeated by a vote of 4-2](#). "I understand people saying it's just a pack of cigarettes, but it's the other things people buy when they enter the store to purchase cigarettes."

Sal Risalvato, the executive director of the NJ Gasoline, Convenience Store and the Automotive Association, which has 1,500 members, agrees with La Ronde that a ban on tobacco sales to those 21 and younger would hurt small businesses by driving nicotine seekers to neighboring towns.

Risalvato also says that 19- and 20-year-olds will find other sources for nicotine products, perhaps by ordering them online.

"The law belongs at the state level so its uniform," Risalvato said. "If one town imposes the law there's nobody in the world who believes it's going to stop a 19-year-old from simply going to another town. Since you're not solving anything, all it's going to do is hurt the business owners in that town."

Risalvato said that the statistics on how raising the age to 21 would potentially save lives are encouraging but he maintained that if the county is serious about stopping young people from smoking there should be a law making smoking illegal.

"You're only making it illegal to sell tobacco to people of a certain age," Risalvato said. "It's nothing more than feel-good legislation. It's not going to accomplish anything."

Despite opponents, Blumenfeld says she's inspired by the growing number of NJ municipalities that are seeking to raise the age to 21.

"We think the momentum should start on the local level," said Blumenfeld. "We don't think municipalities should wait for state uniformity but should lead by example. States tend to take notice. Waiting for state uniformity is a way of passing the buck. Smoking is the number one cause of preventable disease and death. Young people shouldn't have ready accessibility to tobacco. We know 90% of smokers start to smoke before they turn 21."

Dave Hutchinson may be reached at dhutchinson@njadvancemedia.com. Follow him on Twitter [@DHutch_SL](#). Find [NJ.com on Facebook](#).