

NJ inches closer to setting legal age for tobacco at 21

By [Kevin McArdle](#)
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The minimum age to buy or sell tobacco products and electronic cigarettes in New Jersey is 19. [A bill](#) that would raise the legal age to 21 is one step away from Gov. Chris Christie's desk.



NJ is inching closer to raising the age to purchase tobacco products to 21. (Photo by John Moore/Getty Images)

An Assembly committee approved the measure Thursday and the full Assembly is expected to vote on it Monday, the last day of the legislative session.

“Statistics show that 95 percent of habitual smokers started before the age of 21. This legislation would help change the culture and promote a healthy smoke-free lifestyle in the state of New Jersey,” said bill sponsor, Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle (D-Englewood). “The National Institute of Health has proved that raising the tobacco age to 21 can, quite frankly save lives.”

There was opposition, however, from the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, the New Jersey Retail Merchants Association and the New Jersey Food Council. All were worried that small businesses such as convenience stores would take an economic hit as a result of the legislation.

“The direct loss of sales obviously is a concern, but the larger concern is actually the ancillary sales from the person that goes into the store everyday and buys a coffee and sandwich when they buy their tobacco products,” said Mary Ellen Peppard, NJFC assistant vice president for government affairs.

New Jersey is currently one of just four states with the legal smoking age of 19. If this bill were to become law, the Garden State would become the second in the nation to raise the minimum age requirement to purchase tobacco to 21. Hawaii was the first.

“The emergence of electronic cigarettes as an alternative to tobacco and the rapid rise in their popularity has posed a unique allure for teens,” said bill co-sponsor, Assemblywoman Pam Lampitt (D-Voorhees). “We don’t yet have a clear understanding of the long-term effects of e-cigarettes. However, the underlying propensity to become addicted to nicotine is still there and that’s something we need to be vigilant about.”

Critics also said if the minimum age was raised to 21 the state would lose almost \$20 million in sales tax revenue. Vainieri Huttel said that would easily be offset by having to spend less on health care if fewer people were smoking or using any tobacco products.

Currently, 15 Garden State municipalities have adopted ordinances that raised the legal age to buy tobacco products and e-cigarettes to 19:

- Belleville
- Bergenfield
- Bogota
- Est Rutherford
- Englewood
- Garfield
- Highland park
- Paterson
- Princeton
- Rutherford
- Sayreville
- Teaneck
- Tenafly
- Westwood
- Wyckoff

When Paterson was considering adopting the ordinance in October of 2015, Sal Risalvato wrote an op-ed. Risalvato is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store, Automotive Association. The op-ed read in part:

“If our young men and women are old enough to vote, get married, serve their nation in the armed forces, become a state trooper, and be legally adult members of society at 18, then there is no reason to delay their decision to purchase or not purchase tobacco products until 21 years of age.”

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