

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## NJ Lawmakers Debate Raising Smoking Age

**Supporters say proposal would prevent save lives and cut health-care costs; opponents say it would hurt small businesses**

By Kate King  
Jan. 7, 2016

New Jersey could become the second state in the country to raise the legal age to purchase cigarettes and other tobacco products to 21, with a bill expected to head to the governor's desk as early as next week.

A state Assembly committee voted Thursday to approve the bill, which is expected to pass the full Assembly on Monday. The Senate approved the measure in June 2014.

The legal age for smoking in New Jersey is currently 19. On New Year's Day, Hawaii became the first state in the nation to raise the minimum smoking age to 21. Dozens of cities nationwide have set 21 as the legal smoking age, including New York City.

It was unclear Thursday whether New Jersey Gov. [Chris Christie](#), who is running for the Republican presidential nomination, supports the bill.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Christie said the governor doesn't comment on pending legislation and would review the bill if it reached his desk. In 2014, Mr. Christie vetoed legislation that would have banned smoking at beaches and public parks, saying he preferred to leave the matter to local governments.

Under the proposed law, store owners would face fines up to \$1,000 and possible suspension or revocation of their retail licenses for selling smoking products, including electronic cigarettes, to customers younger than 21. The bill doesn't impose a penalty on underage smokers.

Supporters of the legislation said increasing the legal smoking age would save lives and government money spent on health care for smoking-related illnesses.

Opponents said the proposed law wouldn't prevent underage smoking and would hurt small businesses.

A survey conducted in 2013 found that about 16% of New Jersey adults smoke, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of the anti-tobacco nonprofit Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy, said increasing the legal smoking age would prevent young people from picking up the habit.

“It’s been proven time and time again that when tobacco access is reduced, then smoking initiation rates also decline as well as smoking,” Ms. Blumenfeld said.

Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, C-Store and Automotive Association, an industry advocate, said the bill was “feel-good legislation” that would just send young people to the Internet, older friends or across state borders to purchase tobacco products.

“The legal age is 19 right now, yet there are plenty of people under the age of 19 who smoke,” he said. “So where are they getting their cigarettes?”

Mr. Risalvato and Mary Ellen Peppard of the New Jersey Food Council, a retail advocacy group, said raising the legal smoking age would keep customers out of small businesses and hurt sales of other items that they buy along with their cigarettes.

“It actually is a huge impact on our members, significant economic loss,” said Ms. Peppard, who testified before the Assembly’s appropriations committee Thursday.

The state Office of Legislative Services has estimated that raising the legal smoking age in New Jersey would reduce state tax revenue from tobacco sales by as much as \$2.8 million in fiscal year 2016 and up to \$16.2 million the following year, said Assemblyman John Burzichelli, a Democrat and chairman of the Assembly’s appropriations committee.

Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt, who represents Monmouth County and co-sponsored the legislation, said raising the smoking age wouldn't only prevent tobacco dependency but also curb addiction to other substances.

“Addiction happens at a very young age and we know that addiction happens with tobacco first,” said Ms. Lampitt, a Democrat. “Cigarette use and addictive behavior moves into other addictive behaviors.”

A federal government-commissioned report issued last year by the Institute of Medicine estimated that raising the national smoking age to 21 would curb the number of teen smokers, eventually reduce the number of American smokers by 12% and significantly reduce premature death and preterm birth complications.

In New York, an effort to boost the legal age statewide to 21 from 18 has stalled in Albany. The legal smoking age in Connecticut is 18.

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