

# Burlington County Times

## Senate panel approves upping age for buying cigarettes to 21

Posted: Thursday, June 5, 2014 6:15 pm

Updated: 9:51 am, Fri Jun 6, 2014.

By David Levinsky Staff writer Burlington County Times

TRENTON — New Jersey residents cannot legally buy booze until they turn 21, and lawmakers are considering whether to require smokers to be the same age.

A bill to boost the state's minimum age for purchasing cigarettes and other tobacco products from 19 to 21 cleared the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee on Thursday. The new minimum age also would apply to e-cigarettes.

The bill was advanced by a 6-2 vote, with one abstention.

Its sponsors, Sens. Richard Codey, D-27th of Roseland, and Joseph Vitale, D-19th of Woodbridge, said the goal of the legislation was to prevent teenagers from starting smoking. They cited studies showing that 95 percent of smokers take up the habit before they turn 21.

"By raising the age, we'd cut off many, many of these people who are turning to smoking," said Codey, who was serving as governor in 2006 when New Jersey raised the minimum age to purchase tobacco from 18 to 19.

He conceded that some teenagers still would obtain cigarettes illegally, but that many would obey the law, potentially sparing them of severe health consequences later in life.

The measure was supported by anti-smoking groups but was opposed by a representative of New Jersey's gasoline stations and convenience stores, who complained it would increase the number of people that store employees would need to screen and the possibility of their being fined for mistakenly selling cigarettes to underage buyers.

Unlike New Jersey's liquor laws -- which punish people under 21 who are caught drinking booze or possessing alcohol, the state does not have a statute punishing minors who are caught smoking.

"It's my members who will be holding the bag on this," said Sal Risalvato, executive director of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience, Automotive Association. "Why not have a penalty on someone who sneaks by us as well?"

Risalvato said the bill also would cost stores and gas stations revenues from tobacco sales to buyers who are 19 and 20.

"My members are small businesses, and they do depend on that revenue," he said.

Sen. Ronald Rice, D-28th of Newark, argued that adults, even young ones, should be able to make their own decisions about their health.

"They can buy real estate, work, and pay state taxes and sales taxes, but they can't make a decision about whether or not they can, as an adult who is liberated, buy cigarettes?" Rice said. "I'm tired of folks trying to tell adults what to do."

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