

Buying tobacco before age 21? Bill approved by Senate panel says no way



A student smokes a cigarette at The College of New Jersey. Some colleges are considering banning smoking on campus.
(Michael Mancuso/The Times)

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TRENTON -- New Jersey would be the first state in the nation to require young adults to wait until they turn 21 to buy any form of tobacco as well as electronic cigarettes under a bill approved by a state Senate committee today.

New Jersey raised the minimum age for buying cigars, cigarettes and other tobacco products from 18 to 19 in 2006, but Sens. Richard Codey (D-Essex) and Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex) sponsored the bill because they said the law didn't go far enough to deter young adults from smoking.

Codey acknowledged that some people will try get their nicotine fix another way. "But there is a segment of society that will obey the law. The more we can discourage our youth from taking up this terrible habit of smoking, we will improve their lives."

Karen Blumenfeld from Global Advisers on Smokefree Policy praised the bill, noting New Jersey would be the first state to enact such a law. New York City just raised its smoking age to 21 last month. Suffolk County also changed its law that will take effect next year.

"We know 90 percent of youth start to smoke before they turn 21," Blumenfeld said. "At that age they are very vulnerable."

Sal Risalvato, executive director for the NJ Gasoline-Convenience-Automotive Association, questioned the fairness of placing the responsibility of enforcing the law on his clients who run convenience stores and gas stations.

"We have a major concern that unlike alcohol, we are not criminalizing the use of tobacco or possession of it. We're putting my members in a difficult position. It's illegal for them to sell it and the onus and penalty are entirely on them," he said.

Vitale, chairman of the Senate Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee which held a hearing on the bill, said he was not persuaded.

"They ask them for ID. This isn't a TSA screening process," Vitale said. "You are probably asking many of the same people for their ID. They probably look the same." "There will be less individuals able to legally purchase cigarettes which would affect the bottom line, but I don't know if that is an argument is anyone is sympathetic to," Vitale added.

The committee voted 6-2 with one abstention to approve the bill, **(S602)** sending it to the full Senate for a vote.

Sen. Ronald Rice (D-Essex) said he voted no because he thought it was unfair to prevent 19- and 20-year-olds from buying a pack of cigarettes, but "they can buy real estate, pay state and sales taxes" and fight in the military.

"I'm getting tired of folk trying to tell adults what to do," he added.

The committee passed the same bill in the last legislative session but it expired before it was approved by the full legislature.