Protecting youth: Yolo Supervisors take steps to ban flavored tobacco

Yolo Supervisors are working to cut down on youth smoking rates by passing a ban on the sale of flavored tobacco products. Deo Ferrer — Daily Democrat photo illustration

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Posted: 10/13/16, 4:13 PM PDT |

Yolo County is taking another swing at Big Tobacco to prevent the next generation of youth from falling prey to a lifelong nicotine addiction.

Yolo Supervisors took another step this week toward banning the sale of flavored tobacco products in the unincorporated areas of the county.

The ordinance was put forth to address a loophole in the FDA's 2009 ban of flavored cigarettes to apply to all flavored tobacco products. This was one in a series of county efforts to crack down on tobacco use amongst area youth. Last year, the Board passed a countywide ban on e-cigarettes.

Proponents of the ban argue that flavored tobacco products are intended to make tobacco more appealing to youth by improving their taste, smell, and appearance. They come in colorful packaging and in such flavors as watermelon, cotton candy, bubble gum and gummy bears.

Yolo County Health Officer Dr. Ron Chapman asserted that research also shows that tobacco use lead to a higher chance that users will experiment with illicit drugs.

"It's clear from the research that banning flavored tobacco products reduces the use of tobacco in youth," Chapman told Supervisors on Tuesday. "I think this is a great opportunity to save our youth from a lifetime of nicotine addiction and to save the taxpayer the cost of medical costs from heart disease, cancer and emphysema."

Though many residents came forward urging the Board to pass the ban, rural convenience store owners felt that the ordinance would unfairly penalize them and hurt their businesses.

They argued that the ordinance is no longer necessary since the state passed a law prohibiting anyone under the age of 21 to buy tobacco products and, in the past five years, only one of these rural businesses has been written up for selling tobacco to minors.

"If young people are getting it, it is not from us retailers," said one such business owner. "Don't penalize us."

Another echoed concerns voiced at an earlier Supervisors meeting on the topic, saying that they will lose business from people who come in to buy tobacco products and leave with other goods such as gas and groceries.

Madison convenience store owner Parminder Singh asserted that, because the ordinance would only affect rural businesses, people would simply drive to stores within the cities to get their products — hurting rural businesses and not preventing people from buying tobacco.

"I don't think at all that the retailers are selling to those underage and no one wants to punish retailers," Supervisor Jim Provenza assured the business owners. "I think what is happening though is that children are getting cigarettes from someone."

"By banning the sale we're taking away an attractive nuisance," he continued. "It's true that we're only the county and that what we do doesn't affect the cities, but it's important to start somewhere. I think that if we do this we'll ask the cities to do the same thing and be an influence on the cities. The more jurisdictions that do this the closer we get to getting rid of flavored cigarettes."

Supervisor Don Saylor echoed Provenza's statements and added, "This is not about increased enforcement of sales to minors. This is about reducing access to minors of the products designed specifically for them."

Saylor pointed to flavors such as gummy bear and fruit squirt. "These things are not for truck drivers," he commented.

Though the Board was adamant about passing the ordinance, they were sympathetic to the business owners that would be affected by it. To keep them from losing money on inventory already purchased, Supervisors proposed the addition of language in the ordinance that would delay its effect for 180 days.

This motion was passed 3-1, with Supervisor Oscar Villegas dissenting and Supervisor Matt Rexroad abstaining. The motion will be reviewed for a third time with this change at the next meeting on Oct. 25 before it is formally adopted.

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