



# San Francisco votes unanimously to raise tobacco purchasing age from 18 to 21



By Emily Kirschenheuter, KRON (<http://kron4.com/author/kron4emilyk/>)

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SAN FRANCISCO (BCN) — The San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously voted Tuesday to raise the legal age to buy tobacco in the city from 18 to 21 in an effort to reduce youth smoking rates.

The move makes San Francisco the second largest city in the country after New York to raise the tobacco purchasing age to 21.

The state of Hawaii passed a similar law earlier this year, as have Santa Clara County, Berkeley and Healdsburg, but an effort to pass a similar law in the California state legislature stalled after heavy lobbying by the tobacco industry.

Supervisor Scott Wiener, who introduced the legislation, today noted that Healdsburg, a much smaller city in Sonoma County, dropped enforcement of its ordinance last year in response to tobacco industry threats of litigation. San Francisco is different, he said.

“Our city has a history of taking on major industries in the name of public health, in the name of consumers, and winning,” Wiener said.

Wiener said raising the purchasing age will save lives and reduce health care costs.

A federal study released in 2015 found that raising the tobacco purchase age to 21 would decrease smoking rates by 12 percent nationally and reduce the number of youth ages 18 to 21 who start smoking by 25 percent.

Tobacco use costs the United States as much as \$170 billion in health care costs each year. A University of California at San Francisco study estimated that in 2009, smoking cost the city of San Francisco alone \$380 million in direct and indirect costs including health care, lost productivity and premature births.

The board’s vote drew praise from the anti-smoking advocates including the American Heart Association and the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids.

“We know that 95 percent of adult smokers began smoking before they turned 21, and tobacco companies spend billions of dollars annually to market their deadly and addictive products,” campaign president Matthew Myers said in a statement today.

Raising the tobacco sale age to 21 will help counter industry marketing efforts and keep tobacco products out of high schools, Myers said.

Under the legislation approved today, retailers who sell tobacco products would be given a one-year grace period in which no one would be penalized for selling tobacco to anyone 18, 19 or 20.

During that year, the city's Department of Public Health would inform retailers about the new law through mailers, on-site visits, stickers and notices.

After the first year, an enforcement process would then begin, with first-time offenders being given reduced suspension periods, according to the Department of Public Health.

The legislation would only seek to restrict the sale of tobacco, including electronic cigarettes, to people under 21 and would not criminalize the possession of tobacco by a person under 21, according to Wiener.

The new ordinance should go into effect June 1, but businesses will be given a one-year grace period.

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