

## Valley cities divided by demographics on tobacco program Teen population may be why DHS, Coachella opt in

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After the Riverside County Board of Supervisors adopted its tough tobacco licensing program in 2005, county health officials went to the Coachella Valley Association of Governments, hoping an endorsement from the group would open doors in the Coachella Valley.

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Executive Committee minutes show the association recommended individual cities consider adopting the program in April 2006, but most doors have remained closed.

Looking at valley cities that have and haven't opted into the county program, demographics and economics seem to be key factors in some cities' decisions.

The only two cities that have opted into the program so far, Coachella and Desert Hot Springs, both have high percentages of teens.

"Our population is very young; 60 to 70 percent are under 18," said Mayor Pro Tem Steven Hernandez of Coachella, which passed its law in July.

"It is critical that local government step up and provide some kind of guidance for them, so they don't repeat the chain and become smokers," Hernandez said. "If we have healthy adolescents, we would have a healthier workforce."

Representing an older and more upscale demographic, Councilman Alan Seman of Rancho Mirage sees the county program as an additional layer of bureaucracy and discounts the results of a recent health department sting as inconclusive.

Decoys only visited four stores, but were able to buy cigarettes in three.

Like Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage has its own tobacco licensing law that allows for revocation of a retailer's license, he said.

"If there's an issue, it should be reported to us," Seman said. "Rancho Mirage has offered to work with the county to set up our own (program)."

Despite the CVAG endorsement, some city officials are still unaware of the county program, or the results of the health department sting operations. Poor communication and follow-up on the part of county staff seem to be part of the problem.

In Palm Springs, City Manager David Ready has yet to receive figures on the county's September sting operation, which found six out of 10 stores visited in the city still selling to teens.

But Ready said, "I certainly would forward it to the City Council for consideration."

"We haven't reached out to them," Martin Baxter, a health educator with the county, acknowledged. "We've been busy dealing with all the other cities that are coming on board, (so) that's been on the back-burner."

In Indio, Scott Trujillo, the city's human services supervisor, is taking a middle course - pushing hard for the law, while working with the city's Chamber of Commerce to get the business community on board.

He has a meeting with the chamber's government policy committee next month, he said.

"A reduction in illegal sales with no cost to taxpayers and regulation of tobacco sales is beneficial to the city as a whole," he said. "If I can ever deter illegal sales to minors, I'm supporting it."