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Program trying to reduce cigarette sales to teens flounders

Participation low in anti-smoking effort

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Riverside County health officials say they can dramatically reduce cigarette sales to teens without costing cities a cent.

So why aren't more valley cities interested?

Since county supervisors voted to adopt the tobacco retailer licensing program in the unincorporated areas in 2005, half of the 24 cities have opted in.

But most are in the western half of the county, said Robert Peterson, coordinator of tobacco licensing. Only two - Coachella and Desert Hot Springs - are in the Coachella Valley.

"This is one of those issues I don't see too many other sides to," he said. "It's no cost to cities. It's no cost to taxpayers. What are we going to do in revenue lost by kids not buying tobacco?"

The county program requires tobacco retailers to cough up \$350 for a special license. The money goes to the health department to monitor cigarette sales to minors, primarily by sending undercover teens into stores for regular sting operations.

Stores caught selling to minors face losing their license and the right to sell tobacco for periods ranging from one to three months, a provision that gives the law real teeth, Peterson said.

The health department, in an effort to illustrate to cities the need for more enforcement, conducts stings in nonparticipating cities.

In September, the department found rates across the valley ranged from 70 percent in Cathedral City to 50 percent in Palm Desert. Palm Springs scored 60 percent, and Indio 58 percent.

While aware of the county ordinance, City Manager Donald Bradley said, "It's not been anything that's been brought back to us."

"The police department would respond if anyone registered a complaint," Bradley said. "This is the type of violation that would have to be committed in their presence. It's not something we have resources to spend a lot of manpower on."

In Desert Hot Springs, a health department sting operation in April found 27 percent of stores still selling to teens.

The DHS City Council joined the program in September, and sales to teens fell to 10 percent in the most recent round of stings in early January, Peterson said.