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## Coachella City Council approves \$350 license fee for cigarette retailers

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The Press-Enterprise

COACHELLA - The city council members unanimously agreed Wednesday night to help prevent teenage smoking by requiring retailers selling tobacco to obtain a license through the Riverside County Department of Public Health.

Coachella is the first city to work with the department and to allow it to act as the lead agency in providing oversight, regulation and enforcement of the ordinance. Thirteen other cities in Riverside County require licensing, but they manage it on their own.

The annual tobacco retail license fee will be \$350. The ordinance is scheduled for a second reading July 25, when it can be adopted. It would take effect 30 days later.

When the county Public Health Department conducted a sting in June in Coachella, 41 percent of the merchants approached by undercover decoys ages 12 to 17 sold cigarettes to the youths.

Forty-one percent is too big a number to ignore, said Mayor Eduardo Garcia.

"This ordinance gives us an enforcement tool because there is no way to enforce sales to minors," said Councilman Steven Hernandez, adding that the median age in Coachella is 27. "Any time kids' lives are in jeopardy," the issue has to be taken seriously.

Retailers caught selling the product to minors can be fined or have their licenses revoked.

Although it was a unanimous vote, Councilman Gilbert Ramirez Jr. was concerned about tacking on an additional fee for retailers.

Ramirez said that as a business owner himself, he understands that \$350 a year can take a toll on merchants.

For Cardenas Market on Harrison Avenue, health is more important, said Assistant Manager Rafael Garcia.

"Cardenas is founded on the base of principles and values of the family," Garcia said in Spanish, adding that the store sells one or two cartons of cigarettes per week. "Cardenas supports anything pro-health and pro-family."

Before Riverside County passed a countywide licensing requirement in 2005, it is estimated that 5 million packs of cigarettes had been sold in the county to children ages 12 to 17 years of age, said Robert Peterson, director of the Tobacco Retail Licensing Program for the county Department of Public Health.

Peterson sees the \$350 fee as an incentive for business owners to obey the law. The money collected from the licenses will be used to enforce the ordinance and to pay other program-related expenses such as sting operations, Peterson said.

Each year, 10,000 Riverside County 12- through 17-year-olds smoke their first cigarette, Peterson said. One-third of them will become smokers, he said.

Cities such as Riverside, Corona and Norco have seen illegal tobacco sales to minors decline significantly since retailers were asked to obtain licenses, Peterson said.

In subsequent stings, the percentage of retailers who sold cigarettes to decoys dropped to zero in Riverside, where it previously had been 65 percent, and Corona/Norco, where it has been 35 percent. In Murrieta, 7 percent sold cigarettes to the decoys, down from 31 percent.

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