

Tobacco licensing fee declared success in bid to curtail sales to minors

08:13 AM PST on Friday, December 28, 2007

**By KIMBERLY TRONE
The Press-Enterprise**

A \$350 annual licensing fee on tobacco retailers has curtailed cigarette purchases by Riverside County minors, public health officials are reporting.

County supervisors adopted the fee in September 2005, when Riverside County had one of the state's highest rates of tobacco sales to smokers younger than 18.

The average California convenience store sells more than \$30,000 a month in tobacco products and the state Department of Health Services reports that about 10 percent of the sales go to underage smokers.

Retailers in Riverside County's unincorporated areas and participating cities that are caught selling tobacco to buyers younger than 18 risk losing their licenses and tobacco profits.

Sixty-five county tobacco licenses have been revoked.

Supervisor Jeff Stone, who pushed for the fee and urged all 24 cities in the county to join, said about 1,500 merchants have been licensed and the list is growing daily. He estimated as many as 3,000 merchants countywide sell cigarettes or other tobacco products.

Before tobacco licensing went into effect, minors in the county and its cities overall were able to buy tobacco 44 percent of the time during sting operations. The rate has dropped to 15 percent.

"We are saving lives," Stone said.

So far, half the cities in Riverside County have adopted the licensing fee, which is overseen by the Department of Public Health. Moreno Valley and Desert Hot Springs were the most recent cities to join.

In contrast, 12 other cities have shunned the program, which operates on an annual budget of about \$300,000, coming completely from the licensing fees.

Those cities have continued to see high rates of sales to minors during stings where a decoy is sent into a store or gas station to purchase tobacco.

In a statement, Supervisor John Tavaglione said "cities without this program will have to explain to residents why they have not taken this simple step to protect the health of our young people."

Last year the Hemet City Council rejected the licensing program because it was new and there had been no time to evaluate its effectiveness, Assistant City Manager Duane Baker said.

During a September sting, underage decoys were able to buy tobacco products 83 percent of the time from Hemet retailers.

Baker said the council is scheduled to reconsider the licensing program again in January now that statistics on the undercover buy rates are available.

Marvin Schurgin, a legislative ambassador for the American Cancer Society in Palm Desert said almost 85 percent of lung cancer is caused by cigarette smoking, killing almost 14,000 Californians annually.

"The value of the Riverside County tobacco licensing program is that it helps keep cigarettes out of teenagers' hands and that gives them a better chance for a lung-cancer-free future," said Schurgin, who lost his wife Audrey to lung cancer almost eight years ago.

A representative from the California Independent Grocers and Convenience Stores association, which opposed the fee in 2005, calling it the steepest in the state, did not return a telephone call Thursday.

More than 500 stings have been conducted since the fee went into effect, said Robert Peterson, who oversees the licensing program.

Part of the challenge is identifying all the retailers selling tobacco products and giving them a chance to comply.

"We keep finding businesses that are flying under the radar," Peterson said.

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Sting on teen smoking:

Riverside County imposed a tobacco licensing fee that helps pay for enforcement of tobacco laws. Participating communities have shown a decrease in sales of tobacco to minors.

Corona

In 2005, Corona minors succeeded 30 percent of the time buying tobacco and zero percent in March 2007 after a licensing fee was imposed.

Murrieta

In Murrieta, sales to minors fell from 27 percent before the city adopted a licensing fee in 2006 to 5 percent in July.

Cities without tobacco licensing have not fared as well:

Cathedral City

Underage decoys in September bought from 70 percent of merchants Cathedral City.

Indio

Within the last four months, Indio merchants sold to underage buyers 58 percent of the time.

Palm Desert

Palm Desert was 50 percent.

Palm Springs

Palm Springs was 60 percent.

Perris

Perris was 91 percent.

Source: Riverside County Department of Public Health