NYC Council Wants To Make Legal Smoking Age 21

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Lawmakers want New York City to be the first city in the U.S. to raise the legal smoking age to 21 from 18.

The law would make ban vendors from selling any tobacco products to New Yorkers under the age of 21, which Council Speaker Christine Quinn cautiously likened to the sale of alcoholic drinks.

She pointed to an 80 percent decline in drunk driving deaths after the drinking age increased in the 1980s.

Quinn stood alongside Health Department Commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley, fellow council memebers and anti-smoking advocates when she unveiled the new legislation today. The bill would join a group of bills also recently endorsed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg aimed at curbing New Yorkers' smoking habits.

"This can work," Quinn said during a press event at City Hall.

Quinn and advocates cited a 2011 smoking study from the United Kingdom that found a 30 percent decline in smoking among 16- to 17-year-olds after England passed a law to increase the ban to 18 from 16.

Like the English law, only retailers would be punished for selling tobacco products to those younger than 21. While the details of the bill are still being negotiatiated, Farley said that the Department of Consumer Affairs — which currently oversees the ban for those under the age of 18 — would oversee its expansion.

The amount of penalties against retailers is also being negotiatioed.

Quinn said the bill would be introduced to committee on May 2, along with other bills that would legislate how retailers can display the sale of cigarettes and tobacco products and establish a minimum price for cigarettes.

While Bloomberg spoke in favor of the two previous bills in late March, he wasn't enthusasistic about an increase in the city's smoking age when the City Council first entertained the idea in 2006.

"The best ways to reduce smoking among young people is to raise cigarette taxes because cigarette taxes have been shown to directly impact the younger people's ability to buy cigarettes," the mayor said in 2006 .

In response to the Council's bill, the Mayor's office said that Bloomberg had changed his mind on the increase.

"We have cut youth smoking in half, but recently the decline has plateaued," said Samantha Levine, a spokeswoman for the mayor’s office, in a statement. "You may have seen we recently proposed some other measures we had not supported before — requiring stores to remove cigarettes from public view and setting a minimum price — to try to address this. So we revisited this proposal and found new data from the UK that shows it can have an impact.”

Four states currently have laws that make the smoking age 19, and similar laws were passed in New York's Ondandaga, Nassau and Suffolk counties. Texas briefly considered increasing its smoking age to 21, but the bill stalled in late February .

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smoking