

Anti-Tobacco Advocates Target Sales in Corcoran

By Eiji Yamashita
eyamashita@HanfordSentinel.com

Kings County's health advocates are calling on Corcoran city leaders to adopt a fee aimed at city tobacco vendors, one to help pay for police enforcement of a law prohibiting sales of cigarettes to minors.

But the business community is opposing the move, calling it an unfair tax targeting small family businesses that are already struggling to survive.

Both ordinance backers and advocates for local businesses are mobilizing for a showdown before the Corcoran City Council this coming Monday, when both sides are expected to make their case in the tobacco license fee debate.

It's unclear whether city leaders will actually consider adopting the rule.

The proposed ordinance would license all 21 tobacco-selling retailers in Corcoran and establish an annual licensing fee, as well as fines and penalties for noncompliance, said Oralia Vallejo, health educator leading Kings County's tobacco control program. The idea is to make it a financially self-supporting law, she said.

Although limiting teens' access to tobacco remains the main focus, the ordinance would also include language restricting sales of crack pipes, which Vallejo says often take place at some of these stores -- likely an attempt to win support from the county's influential anti-drug community.

"The laws have been around for many years; it's always been illegal for under-aged youth to purchase tobacco," Vallejo said. "But the reason that the retail licensing ordinance is effective is that it has an enforcement piece. It generates funds for local law enforcement."

Vallejo said it's not a tax but an annual "user fee," which is estimated to be about \$165 per year. He said the ordinance came about because the Corcoran Drug, Alcohol and Tobacco Task Force identified it as a problem. The Corcoran Kiwanis Club as well as the Optimist Club are supporting the effort.

But the Corcoran Chamber of Commerce has publicly opposed the proposed ordinance.

Darrell Frey, chamber president and CEO, said it is unfair to impose taxes that target small businesses like convenience stores.

"Any new fees or new taxes against small businesses, we think, [are] unwarranted," Frey said. "They already pay a one-time fee to sell tobacco, which is supposed to finance enforcement. And we're taxed on cigarettes \$1.84 a pack. That money is collected by the state ... But the money did not go to where it should've gone, such as prevention."

Frey is not shy about revealing his past as a heavy smoker and the fact that he suffers from lung cancer and undergoes chemotherapy.

"I am against selling kids cigarettes," he said.

"By no way are we [condoning] kids smoking cigarettes. Business people don't want that to happen," Frey said. "The point is, small businesses are facing increasing fees already."

But illegal sales of tobacco to minors is a problem in Corcoran more often than it is in Hanford, Avenal or Kettleman City, according to a decoy operation conducted last year.

One in five retailers sold tobacco to decoys compared to one in seven in Hanford and Kettleman City, according to the data.

Smoking is the No.1 cause of preventable deaths in the United States, with 440,000 deaths per year attributed to smoking, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Kings County's smoking rate of 18 percent is five points higher than the state average of 13 percent.

Preventing teen smoking is key to reversing the trend, because many smokers today were teen smokers who couldn't quit, Vallejo said. Teen smokers are also much more likely to drink and use drugs than nonsmokers, she said.

"It's all about the kids," Vallejo said. "Reducing youth access is so key to reducing tobacco use in our community."

The reporter can be reached at 583-2429.

(Dec. 4, 2009)