

SF approves 50 percent reduction in tobacco-selling stores

By Joshua Sabatini



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It could take up to 15 years to cut The City's nearly 1,000 tobacco permits in half after the Board of Supervisors approved legislation Tuesday restricting the number issued.

Hundreds of businesses currently hold city permits to sell tobacco in San Francisco's poorest neighborhoods, but only a handful are in more affluent areas.

Faced with this disparity, a group of San Francisco youths with the nonprofit Youth Leadership Institute has worked since 2008 to impose density controls on tobacco permits. On Tuesday, that dream came true with the Board of Supervisors' unanimous approval of the Tobacco Sales Reduction Act.

The law imposes a cap of 45 tobacco-selling permits issued for each of the 11 supervisor districts in The City. For some, that would be a dramatic decrease.

The legislation, introduced by Supervisor Eric Mar, doesn't eliminate existing permits, but through attrition, it is estimated that it would take 10 to 15 years to halve the existing nearly 1,000 tobacco permits across The City.

"This is the most comprehensive tobacco controls on tobacco licenses of any city in this country," Mar said. "It really is about protecting kids and schools and vulnerable communities from smoking and targeting and marketing by Big Tobacco."

The effort focused on health equity due to having higher concentrations of tobacco-selling businesses in lower-income areas like the Tenderloin compared to more affluent neighborhoods. And the initiative builds on San Francisco's longstanding movement to reduce smoking, such as by expanding areas where people cannot smoke.

The nonprofit's 2011 permit data showed there were 270 permits in District 6, including the Tenderloin and South of Market, and 147 in District 3, which has Chinatown and North Beach. The District 7's Inner Sunset had a low of 37 permits, followed by 45 in District's 8 Twin Peaks.

The permit restrictions apply to electronic cigarettes as well.

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Blake He, who is fighting an appeal of his plan to open up Happy Vape, an e-cigarette and steamstone hookah lounge on Ocean Avenue, said in an email that the board should hold off requiring uniform controls on e-cigarettes and conventional cigarettes given the ongoing debate about the health risks associated with the burgeoning vapor industry.

"The supervisors should allow the industry to present their data and share with them more information before voting on this proposed legislation," He wrote. "This legislation is trying to further clump electronic vaporizers into the same category as cigarettes and other traditional tobacco products."

Mar had previously passed a law requiring a tobacco permit to sell e-cigarettes. The legislation also imposes new restrictions for when The City issues new permits to sell tobacco. Under the ordinance, no tobacco-selling business can operate within 500 feet of another one or a school. Also taking effect is an outright ban on shops in which more than 50 percent of their business is dedicated to tobacco products and paraphernalia.



"Higher tobacco retail density encourages smoking by making cigarettes more accessible and available, by normalizing tobacco use, and through increasing environmental cues to smoke," the legislation says. "Research focused on California has found a higher prevalence of current smoking and experimental smoking among students at schools in areas with a higher density of tobacco outlet."

The cap on tobacco permits comes as The City has increased its efforts to work with businesses to incentivize them to sell healthier products, such as by providing assistance with business plans to seek a profit without relying on tobacco sales.

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