

# Ordinance cuts tobacco sales to minors

## Fewer stores sold to teenage decoys

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EL CAJON — El Cajon's tobacco licensing ordinance — one of the toughest in the state — is resulting in fewer stores illegally selling cigarettes to youngsters, backers say.

Five percent of 125 stores in El Cajon sold tobacco to youths who served as underage decoys in fiscal 2008, according to a report released last week. A similar survey in 2004, before El Cajon's ordinance was enacted, showed that 40 percent of the city's stores sold tobacco to minors.

El Cajon Councilman Gary Kendrick, who pushed for passage of the ordinance, said the numbers show that it's working.

"It's a tremendous success by any measure," he said.

The El Cajon City Council approved a tobacco licensing ordinance in June 2004 to curb underage smoking. The city was the first in San Diego County to adopt such a law.

If El Cajon tobacco retailers violate the law by selling to minors, fail to ask for ID or do not display the proper signs, they risk a \$1,000 fine or a 30-day license suspension. Retailers who violate the law four times in five years face the permanent loss of their licenses.

Many tobacco retailers were opposed to the law from the start, saying they were already taxed enough. Tobacco retailers were initially required to pay a \$198 annual fee, which has since risen to \$675 to cover the costs of enforcing and administering the program.

Samantha Dabish, vice president of the Neighborhood Market Association, said the cost of the permit is a financial burden for small stores. Educating business owners should be a higher priority than penalizing them, she said.

"We think (city officials) could work more as a team with the retailers rather than set them up," said Dabish, whose association represents 2,000 retailers in California, Arizona and Nevada.

Since El Cajon's passage of the measure, Vista and the city of San Diego have also approved ordinances requiring tobacco retailers to buy a license. Solana Beach approved an ordinance in July but it hasn't gone in effect, while Del Mar is considering a similar ordinance.

The Center for Tobacco Policy Organizing, a unit of the American Lung Association, lists El Cajon among 63 communities in California with strong tobacco ordinances in effect for more than a year. More than 80 communities have passed ordinances, but some have provisions that make them ineffective, the group said.

Debbie Kelly of the American Lung Association said cities with strong tobacco licensing laws have seen dramatic decreases in tobacco sales to minors.

"These ordinances are very important," she said. "If it's harder for a kid to get their hands on tobacco, then maybe they just won't do it."

Communities Against Substance Abuse, an El Cajon nonprofit, has a \$32,751 contract with El Cajon to recruit teenagers posing as cigarette buyers to ensure the law is being enforced.

One of the youths, 16-year-old Alma Alvarez, a senior at Steele Canyon High School in Jamul, said a clerk at one store urged her to buy a three-pack of cigarettes on sale when she asked for a pack of Camel Lights.

"It can be easy for a young person to obtain tobacco products if the laws regarding tobacco sales to minors are not consistently enforced," Alvarez told the El Cajon City Council.

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