

Vineland proposes ban on smoking

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VINELAND — City workers who enjoy a good smoke, or even just a pinch of tobacco between cheek and gum, will have to go farther to enjoy their nicotine rush.

A smoke-free zone would descend around all municipal-owned properties in about three weeks under a measure the City Council is expected to adopt Tuesday. Violators could be fined hundreds of dollars.

The proposed ordinance revision states Vineland “finds it in the best interest of the health, safety and welfare of the general public” to ban tobacco in any form on virtually any city-owned property. The state of New Jersey already has a similar rule.

Electronic cigarettes, which create a nicotine-infused vapor that resembles smoke, are included in the proposed Vineland ban, City Solicitor Richard Tonetta said. The proposal also covers herbal products, such as cigarettes produced overseas with oregano instead of tobacco, he said.

Currently, people can smoke outside City Hall or the nearby Police Department building. The new rules would have a particularly broad effect in that area because, in addition to those municipal buildings, the Vineland Public Schools headquarters is on the other side of the block on Plum Street; the school system already has a tobacco ban.

“Basically, the whole block would be smoke-free,” health department Director Dale Jones said. “Somebody on the other side of the street can knock their socks off.”

The ban would be the latest in a long series of restrictions targeting tobacco users in New Jersey that have limited smokers’ ability to light up while having dinner, gambling at casinos or even visiting some beaches. In 2004, Vineland banned smoking in all city-owned parks.

Councilwoman Maritza Gonzalez, a liaison to the health department, links tobacco bans to “health and wellness” programs, such as the summer festivals Vineland held last year.

“Many of our residents struggle daily with their addiction,” Gonzalez said in a statement. “The tobacco industry targets our youth each and every day to become smokers in an effort to replace the smokers who die or quit.”

Gonzalez said 23 percent of Cumberland County residents smoke. That’s the highest rate in New Jersey, she said.

“I want to teach our kids that smoking isn’t the norm,” said Gonzalez, an educator in the city’s school system. “To do that, we have to create environments that are tobacco-free so they not only hear the message ‘don’t ever start to smoke,’ they perceive it as well because it’s not permitted everywhere.”

The ordinance proposes fines for violators, starting at \$100 for a first offense. The fine is between \$100 and \$200 for two-time offenders, and then \$200 to \$500 for third-time offenders.

Jones said offenses would be handled “on a case-by-case basis.”

Besides police, the ordinance could be enforced by health and code enforcement officials or city Recreation Commission representatives.

The restriction is driven by complaints about smoke, no litter from discarded butts, he said.

“And in conjunction with the business administrator, we discussed the matter and decided it was time to do something,” he said.