

Howard council to consider vaping ban for public places

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The Howard County Council is considering a ban on smoking electronic cigarettes in public places.

Councilman Jon Weinstein, a Democrat from Ellicott City, introduced the legislation at the council's voting session Monday night. Democratic councilmembers Calvin Ball and Jen Terrasa are co-sponsors.

E-cigarettes – battery-powered devices that allow smokers to inhale nicotine without producing the noxious smoke of a traditional cigarette – have blossomed into a \$1.5 billion industry since being introduced in the United States less than a decade ago.

According to a National Institute on Drug Abuse report cited in the bill, use of electronic cigarettes and vaporizers, or "vaping," has doubled every year since 2010.

Weinstein's legislation would add e-cigarettes to a 2006 law banning smoking in public places, including inside bars, restaurants, stores and offices, and at open-air concert venues and sports arenas.

The councilman said he decided to introduce the bill because he's concerned that smoke from e-cigarettes might have unknown harmful effects. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration does not yet regulate the devices. On its website, the FDA notes that e-cigarettes "have not been fully studied" and might come with as-yet-undiscovered risks, including the possibility that inhaling secondhand vapor from the devices could expose bystanders to harmful chemicals.

A recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that e-cigarette use increased dramatically among teenagers last year; 13.4 percent of high schoolers surveyed said they had used an e-cigarette at least once in the past 30 days, compared with 4.5 percent who said the same in 2013.

"For me, it's just common sense with the rapid increase of use, particularly among teens and younger teens, which for me was particularly alarming," Weinstein said. "We need to treat it like any other kind of smoking, whether the device is something you light with a match or you have a battery in."

Locally and nationwide, lawmakers are considering the effects of the rise in vaping on public health. Though the Maryland General Assembly has declined to prohibit vaping in public places, Maryland is among a growing number of states that bans minors from buying e-cigarettes. In November, the Baltimore City Council approved a bill prohibiting vaping inside most businesses, and Boston, New York City, New Jersey, Los Angeles and Utah have all passed similar bans.

But Shawn Bowser, who owns Big Kahuna, a vape shop in Ellicott City, said he doesn't understand concerns about teens turning to vaping. Most of his customers are former smokers or people trying to kick a smoking habit.

"Most people's goal is actually to quit smoking," Bowser, who has operated his business for three years and sold vaping products out of a brick-and-mortar store at the Normandy shopping center for the past two, said.

He said he "could count on one hand" the number of teenage customers who have entered the shop. Only about 10 customers he's met had never smoked before.

The vaping ban is the next in a series of public health and safety bills proposed by Democrats on the council in recent months.

Last month, councilmembers voted 4-1 to pass a bill banning weapons in county buildings, with exceptions for police officers and people who have permission to carry guns on county business. Fulton Republican Greg Fox, who said the bill would be ineffective at making county buildings safer because they are not equipped with metal detectors, was the dissenting vote.

The council is also considering a bill that would create a set of nutritional standards for food and drinks sold on county property, with the goal of offering healthier options. That legislation was tabled Monday night.

Ball, the nutrition bill's sponsor, said he wanted to iron out the details of the bill after a busy budget season.

"This gives us the time to work through any questions and clarifications," he said of the decision to table.

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