

Quakertown bans youth from lighting up in public

By Brian Callaway
Of The Morning Call

Quakertown Council voted Wednesday to ban tobacco use by minors on public streets and sidewalks despite concerns that the law may not do much to curb teen smoking.

Council voted 6-0 to pass the new law, which was proposed more to deal with public nuisances — notably, large crowds of youngsters smoking and littering in neighborhoods near Quakertown High School — than to improve public health. Councilman Dave Wilsey was absent.

The law, which includes a \$50 fine per violation, makes Quakertown one of only a few communities in Pennsylvania to have such restrictions on young smokers.

While it's illegal for minors to purchase tobacco, and for anyone to smoke on school grounds, it's not against the law in most places for minors to smoke.

Adults at Wednesday's meeting said they generally support the measure, but the only teen who spoke said the new law is "one more thing for children to rebel against."

"I don't have a lot of data and facts and figures," 17-year-old Steve Witman said. "But I do believe that you will see an increase [in kids smoking] because of this law."

According to surveys, Quakertown-area high school students are already more likely to smoke than their peers elsewhere.

In the most recent statistics compiled by the Upper Bucks Healthy Communities Healthy Youth initiative, for instance, 28 percent of Quakertown-area 12th-graders admitted to using tobacco. Only 23.2 percent of high school students nationwide reported using tobacco during that period.

Lee Rush, executive director of the nonprofit justCommunity, which coordinates activities to help youngsters, said he supports the law, but hopes more teen smokers will also be guided into programs to help them quit.

"A simple ordinance is not the only solution we've gotta add to the arsenal," he said.

Rush also said he doesn't think a \$50 fine will be enough to stop most minors from smoking.

Council President Dennis Hallman agreed, saying the fine is "a small, small price" for some youth to pay.

Council decided to stick with the \$50 fine for now, however. Officials said they may raise it in the future if they see the need.

The ordinance was proposed because of complaints from people who live near Quakertown High School that minors congregate in certain spots — such as S. Seventh Street and Lehigh Drive, an area dubbed "Cancer Corner" by some — where they smoke and leave trash behind after school.

The borough has rules against littering, but police have said it's difficult with crowds to figure out who's leaving trash behind.

Quakertown police Chief Scott McElree said other towns that have passed similar smoking bans to address loitering and litter issues have had success. Those other laws also had fines worth \$50.

While the law is aimed at teen smokers near the high school, it applies in outdoor public areas throughout the borough. Police have said they will have a warning period before they start issuing citations.

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SMOKE-OUT

■ **WHAT:** Quakertown law that bans minors from using or possessing tobacco products on public streets, alleys, sidewalks or rights of way.

■ **WHY:** According to the ordinance, because "use and possession of tobacco products by [people] under the age of 18 is contrary to the health, safety, and general well-being of the public at large, the minors engaging in such conduct, and the residents of the Borough of Quakertown."

■ **PENALTIES:** Violators could be ordered to pay a fine of up to \$50, although police have said there would be a warning period before anyone is cited.