

Calif. on cusp of raising smoking age to 21

By Associated Press

California lawmakers voted Thursday to make the nation's most populous state the second to raise the smoking age from 18 to 21 as part of a sweeping package of measures they are considering to crack down on tobacco.

Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown still must sign off on the legislation the Senate approved to make California the first state after Hawaii with the higher age limit. His spokesman said last week that the governor generally does not comment on pending legislation.

The bills also would restrict electronic cigarettes the same as tobacco products. The increasingly popular devices are not regulated by the federal government.

The higher age limit got approved despite amid intense lobbying from tobacco interests and fierce opposition from many Republicans, who say the state should butt out of people's personal decisions, even if they are harmful to health.

The six bills, which the Assembly has already backed, represent California's most substantial anti-tobacco effort in nearly two decades, the American Cancer Society said.

"With California having such a huge population, it's going to be very impactful nationwide," said Cathy Callaway, associate director of state and local campaigns for the American Cancer Society.

The Senate vote comes just more than a week after San Francisco officials opted to raise the tobacco buying age to

21, making it the largest city to do so after New York. Nationwide, more than 120 municipalities have raised the smoking age, according to Tobacco 21, a group that advocates the policy shift nationally.

Hawaii was first to adopt the higher age limit statewide. New Jersey's Legislature voted to raise the smoking age from 19 to 21, but the bill died when Republican Gov. Chris Christie decided not to act on it before a January deadline.

Advocates note that the vast majority of smokers start before they are 18, according to data from the U.S. surgeon general. Making it illegal for 18-year-old high school students to buy tobacco for their underage friends will make it more difficult for teens to get the products, they say.

Critics say adults are trusted to make weighty decisions to vote or join the military once they turn 18. In response, Democrats changed the bill to allow members of the military to continue buying cigarettes at 18.

"You can commit a felony when you're 18 years old and for the rest of your life, be in prison," Assembly Republican Leader Chad Mayes said. "And yet you can't buy a pack of cigarettes."

Another bill would classify e-cigarettes, or "vaping" devices, as tobacco products subject to the same restrictions on who can purchase them and where they can be used.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration proposed regulating e-cigarettes but the rule has not taken effect.

Anti-tobacco advocates fear that vaporizers are enticing to young people and may encourage them to eventually take up smoking. Others say they are a less-harmful, tar-free alternative to cigarettes. They have not been extensively studied, and there is no scientific consensus on their harms or benefits.

The package of bills would expand smoke-free areas to include bars, workplace breakrooms, small businesses, warehouses, and hotel lobbies and meeting rooms. Smoking bans would apply at more schools, including charter schools, and counties would be able to raise their own cigarette taxes beyond the state's levy of 87 cents per pack.

Anti-smoking groups are collecting signatures for a November ballot initiative that would raise the cigarette tax to \$2 a pack and direct the money to health care, tobacco-use prevention, research and law enforcement.