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Cities sign on to effort to curb tobacco advertising

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A nonprofit that wants to curb tobacco advertising it says targets young people is enlisting local municipalities in its efforts.

POW'R Against Tobacco, a nonprofit that promotes health and wellness around the state, has enlisted three Westchester cities so far - White Plains, Mount Vernon and, recently, New Rochelle - in its fight. The group plans to reach out to more communities soon.

The goal is to have businesses "reduce, remove or rearrange" cigarette ads that often target young people, said Makeda James, coordinator of the group's initiatives in Westchester County.

"We rather they remove it, but if it's not feasible, we want them to get it out of eye level," James said yesterday. "The whole idea is to reduce youth initiation in smoking."

The New Rochelle City Council this week unanimously passed a memorializing law - which means it's mostly symbolic in nature - that bans cigarette advertising within 1,000 feet of any child care center, children's institution, playground, school or youth center. It also asks retailers to eliminate tobacco signage at counter and wall space, walls and windows, and near candy displays.

The measure does not actually regulate businesses, but rather is the city's way of taking part in an "organized" and "systematic" effort to keep children from developing poor health habits, Mayor Noam Bramson said.

"It seems to be a good cause that promotes the public health," Bramson said of the council's support.

James cited several campaigns, particularly Camel No. 9 with its "Light and Luscious" hot pink and black branding, as targeting girls and woman between the ages of 12 and 25. Virginia Slims and its "You've come a long way, baby" campaign has historically targeted women, too.

"They're specifically targeted to women and girls. It looks glamorous and attractive," James said. "A lot of this resonates with younger children."

James said she "understood business is business and the bottom line is important," but smokers generally "know where to get them" and don't need the marketing.

So far, four stores in Westchester - two in White Plains and two in Mount Vernon - have agreed to either remove or reposition advertisements, James said. Others in Rockland, Orange and Putnam have done the same, she said.

Even though the 4th Street Mini Mart at which Sam Dev works sells smokes, he doesn't oppose a move to voluntarily restrict advertisements. Dev said it seemed like a reasonable measure that would keep some people from smoking.

"I don't think it's necessary," Dev said of advertisements and promotions. "People know where they can get cigarettes."

Tobacco companies spend \$15.4 billion to market cigarettes in the United States, including about \$500 million in New York, James said, citing Federal Trade Commission statistics.

It is also believed that 25,000 minors in New York start smoking each year and a similar number of people die every year from tobacco-related illness, according to the group's literature.

By having local municipalities support this, "It gives our organization more credibility," James said. "If local government is supporting it, it sends a message to the rest of the community."