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Chain to stop selling tobacco products

Jerry Gleeson
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DeCicco Family Markets prides itself on the variety of merchandise it offers customers at its six stores in Westchester and Rockland counties. But effective March 1, there's one product shoppers won't be able to buy anymore - tobacco.

"We hope this act will help improve quality of life and ultimately the health of our customers and staff. Additionally, we sincerely hope this decision will help discourage your children from ever starting," reads a notice posted at the markets. "Thank you for your understanding."

DeCicco's decision comes on the heels of an announcement last month by Wegmans Food Markets Inc. that it would stop selling cigarettes and other tobacco products. Rochester-based Wegmans - like DeCicco's, a family-owned business - ended tobacco sales Feb. 10 at its 70 stores across five states.

The timing may be a coincidence. Both companies said their decisions were driven internally. But it may generate discussion that could lead other stores to follow suit, said Mark Hamstra, a retail-financial writer at Supermarket News in Manhattan.

"It can't be that much profit that they're giving up," he said. "The business argument might be to create sort of a health halo around the supermarket. ... It just adds a little credibility when a supermarket does make health claims about food products."

Last year, North Brewster Deli and Market gave up tobacco sales, with the owner citing the store's proximity to a school as one of his reasons.

Certain food chains, such as Whole Foods Markets, have never sold tobacco.

The San Francisco Bay area-based Andronico's markets stopped selling tobacco at its seven stores Feb. 4 because it conflicted with the company's goal of providing "sustainable, wholesome, well-crafted products" for its customers, operations administrator Diane Krebs said.

There may be a "very small amount of backlash" from smokers against stores that drop the product, Hamstra said.

"Obviously, there is that risk there," he said. "I don't think it's been out there long enough to make a really strong judgment yet on what the impact is."

John DeCicco Jr., director of operations for the markets, said complaints have been minimal and customers - smokers and nonsmokers alike - have been supportive.

"We were struck by that, to be honest," said DeCicco, 30. "They (smokers) said: 'If it were more difficult to get cigarettes, maybe we'll quit smoking.'"

The decision was made by family members in the past few weeks, DeCicco said. They include his father, John DeCicco Sr., 59, and brother, Chris; the elder DeCicco brothers, Frank and Joseph, and their sons, Frank and Joseph Jr.; and Jim Capriotti, the elder DeCicco's son-in-law.

None of them smoke.

The business was founded in 1973 and employs about 500 full- and part-time workers at its sites in New City, Pelham, Scarsdale, Jefferson Valley, Bronxville and Ardsley. The markets frequently donate food for charitable causes, and family members are active in their communities.

John DeCicco Sr. is on the board of the Rockland Community College Foundation, and he and his two brothers will be recognized in April at an annual fundraiser for Good Samaritan Hospital in Suffern, on whose foundation board DeCicco also serves. John DeCicco Jr. is a member of the Entrepreneurship Board at Fordham Graduate School of Business, and his uncle, Frank, is on the board of the Catholic Institute of the Food Industry, which raises funds for charity.

Tobacco sales do not make up a significant portion of DeCicco's revenue.

John DeCicco Jr. estimated that tobacco accounted for \$500,000 of the company's \$75 million in annual sales, contributing \$100,000 in annual profit.

The family's Ardsley store, which opened about 20 months ago, never sold tobacco because the family wanted to focus on food operations, he said.

Extending the policy to the other stores was a unanimous decision, he said.

Several patrons interviewed had mixed reactions to the new policy.

"I'm surprised, but I think it's a good decision," said Dr. Patti Devine, 43, of Pelham, as she loaded groceries into her van outside the neighborhood market. "I think if you make it (buying tobacco) a little bit harder to do, bit by bit it will change. ... I have no doubt it's a hard habit to break."

Richard Holt, 66, also of Pelham, said he was "kind of torn" by DeCicco's move.

"I can understand why companies are doing this," he said. "For people who smoke, it's getting awfully hard for them."

Cigarette use is reaching new lows in the United States, driven in part by new restrictions on advertising that accompanied a lawsuit settlement with the tobacco industry, the National Association of Attorneys General said.

The association said 378 billion cigarettes were sold in the United States in 2005, the lowest number since 1951, when the American population was less than half its level of 2005.

An Elmsford-based group, POWR Against Tobacco, has lined up resolutions from 11 local governments in the Lower Hudson Valley endorsing the reduction of signage promoting cigarettes at local stores.

The group has used the resolutions to lobby stores to reduce such signage. Close to 50 retailers have done so, POWR director Maureen Kenney said.

The New York state chapter of the American Cancer Society praised DeCicco's decision and said it might be an emerging trend.

"It is easier for family-owned businesses like DeCicco's to make this type of ethical decision, but now pressure will be building on publicly owned supermarkets and pharmacy chains to address this issue as well," the society said in a statement. "Tobacco marketing is based on having cigarettes ubiquitously available. As more stores refuse to sell cigarettes, we may see a reduction in the consumption of cigarettes as well."

Greg Mathe, a spokesman for Philip Morris USA in Richmond, Va., said he couldn't speculate about whether DeCicco's move was part of an emerging trend. He declined to comment further.