



Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 5th, 2010

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Illegal Tobacco sales to minors increase by 60% & exceed statewide rate; Rates are highest in the unincorporated areas of County

Twenty-seven percent of the stores surveyed in Santa Cruz County are willing to sell tobacco to minors, according to a survey conducted in August, 2010. This countywide rate represents a 60% increase from the sales rate in 2008 when 17% of stores sold to minors. At least 19 stores that sold were within walking distance to a school or after school program— ranging from across the street to .7 miles.

The number of stores willing to sell tobacco to minors is the highest in the unincorporated areas of the County: 42%. The City of Santa Cruz has the second highest rate (26%), followed by Capitola (18%), and Watsonville (10%). In several mid-county neighborhoods such as Live Oak, Soquel, Aptos, and Freedom, approximately half of the stores are willing to sell tobacco to minors.

While rates are rising in Santa Cruz County, the statewide rate is at an all time low of 8.6% as of 2009. The countywide rate for Santa Cruz is three times the statewide rate, and the unincorporated area is five times higher.

These are the results from a youth purchase survey conducted by the Santa Cruz County Tobacco Education Coalition in August 2010. Underage youth between the ages of 15 and 17 visited 142 stores in all jurisdictions in Santa Cruz County except Scotts Valley. Youth attempted to purchase tobacco products under the concealed supervision of an adult.

After conducting the survey, one of the teens said, “It was so easy, most of the time they didn’t even bother to ask for an ID – and when they did and I said that I didn’t have it, they sold to me anyway.”

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Co-Chair

Kathleen Hofvendahl-Clark

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“It’s alarming to see this problem is getting worse,” states Peter Nichols, chair of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission. “The irony is that the statewide rate is at an all-time low. In our County, we want the percentage of stores selling to minors to be zero, and we can get there.”

One city in Santa Cruz County, Watsonville, has addressed the problem of illegal sales to minors by recently adopting an ordinance requiring tobacco retailers in the city limits to purchase a license to sell tobacco. The license will provide sufficient funds for local law enforcement to conduct consistent and on-going enforcement of tobacco laws. Merchants still selling tobacco illegally to underage youth would have their license suspended or revoked – providing a strong incentive to comply with tobacco laws.

“Watsonville showed tremendous leadership in being the first in the County to adopt an ordinance to stop illegal tobacco sales to minors. Watsonville has embraced a solution that will protect our youth today and for years to come,” states Kathleen Hofvendahl-Clark, chair of the Santa Cruz County Tobacco Education Coalition. “We encourage other communities in the County to make the same commitment to our youth.” The Coalition has begun discussions with the Board of Supervisors and members of the Santa Cruz City Council.

80 California communities have adopted tobacco retail licensing ordinances, and the results are dramatic. By providing a steady source of funding for the police department to survey tobacco retailers, local licensing laws have substantially decreased illegal sales to minors. In San Luis Obispo, the number of stores selling to minors dropped from 17% to 0% after they adopted the licensing program.

“What has been shown to be highly effective is a tobacco retail licensing program – it provides a sustainable funding source so police can conduct regular and on-going decoy operations. That is how we are going to get to zero,” adds Nichols.

In Watsonville, each tobacco retailer pays an annual fee of \$255 to obtain a license to sell tobacco. The fee goes directly to the city to administer the licenses and to pay for the police department to conduct four youth decoy operations each year to enforce tobacco laws. The ordinance also includes a provision to address the sales of drug paraphernalia.

Most people agree that kids and tobacco are a deadly combination. Statistics show that nearly 90 percent of the Californians who die each year from smoking related disease started their deadly habit before they were 18 years old. Despite this and the fact that selling tobacco to minors has been illegal for more than 100 years, retailers continue to do so.

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