

Ban aims to halt teens' smoking

By Lee Quarstrom
Mercury News Staff Writer

After listening to testimony about the availability of cigarettes to minors, Santa Cruz County supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday to ban all vending machines dispensing smokes in the unincorporated portions of the county.

Board members acted after several speakers representing public health groups argued that minors can easily purchase cigarettes from vending machines, even those in bars where people younger than 21 are not allowed. Supervisors acted despite arguments by operators of two vending machine companies that teen-agers do not purchase tobacco products from the coin-operated devices in bars and lounges.

"Most of my locations" for cigarette machines "are

See BAN, Page 2B

BAN, from Page 1B

in bars," only," said Ron Shaffer, owner of Santa Cruz Vending, "and people under 18 are not allowed in them."

Saying he believes that smoking is unhealthy, Shaffer pointed to convenience stores as a prime source of cigarettes for youngsters. He said cigarettes cost less in the markets, although it is illegal for a clerk to sell cigarettes to minors.

Agreeing with Shaffer was Robert Orcutt, owner of Valley Vending.

"I don't smoke. I don't condone it," he said. "But . . . I think it's an issue of personal freedom."

But the testimony of two junior high school students seemed to sway the five supervisors away from a partial prohibition — a ban on cigarette vending machines everywhere except bars.

"Most of my friends smoke. It's really sad to me," said Jessica Lewis, a 12-year-old seventh-grader at Branciforte Junior High in Santa Cruz. "These cigarettes are killing my friends."

Schoolmate Marvin Christie, 14, an eighth-grader, said he had learned at a recent "youth summit" that cigarettes are readily available to young people who have the money to put into vending machines.

Jessica Crawford, a spokeswoman for the Ameri-

can Cancer Society who favored the stronger version of the ban, told supervisors:

"We're not trying to outlaw the sale of cigarettes in bars. They could be sold by bartenders."

Ellie Hall, head of the county health services agency, noted that a ban on cigarette vending machines adopted by the Watsonville City Council prohibits them everywhere, including bars not patronized by minors. She urged supervisors to adopt an ordinance consistent with the Watsonville ban.

She also said Santa Cruz city officials are close to enacting a ban, while similar prohibitions in Capitola and Scotts Valley "are in the talking stage."

Urging support for a total ban on the devices was Betsy McCarty, representing the county public health commission.

"Smoking," she said, "is an addiction that's important to stop at the start."

In voting for the ban, Supervisor Jan Beautz said she would be willing to allow the machines to stay in bars, but for the testimony from the two students during the hearing.

Pointing to the testimony from the two Branciforte Junior High School students, Beautz said:

"If you want to know what kids are doing, you should ask kids."