

Cigarette machines

Bar owners blast 'token' solution

Alternative way to buy cigarettes going up in smoke

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The idea of using tokens to purchase cigarettes from machines in Santa Cruz bars is "a smoke screen," according to one vending-machine distributor.

The problems of conversion, counterfeiting and inventory control will bring Santa Cruz bar owners back to the City Council Tuesday to again plead their case.

Council members took the first step to ban cigarette vending machines within the city limits Sept. 10, when they agreed to let bars keep them, but only if they use tokens that must be purchased from the bartender.

"A re-examination of these restrictions is ... necessary because I must inform this council that the cigarette machine with a mechanism which takes 'tokens' is a great idea in theory, but in practice is impossible," wrote Beverly Mathis-Swanson, spokeswoman for Tavern Owners United for Fairness.

Councilman Neal Coonerty, who proposed the token demand after Mathis-Swanson broached it during the Sept. 10 meeting, suggested Friday that it

may have been a "hollow offer."

"They offered to do tokens, and once it was put in place it was withdrawn," said Coonerty, who initially had sought to have the machines banned everywhere, including bars.

"If it's an important part of the bars, they can sell them over the counter," said Coonerty. "I don't think the means of selling them has to be the machines."

But Mathis-Swanson said she had told the council she was "looking into" the possibility of using tokens as a way of allaying fears of those who worried minors could slip into bars and buy cigarettes.

"Believe me, I've not only looked into it, I've been in contact with vending companies from San Francisco to New York City," wrote Mathis-Swanson. "A cigarette vending machine which accepts 'tokens' does not exist in San Francisco, the Bay Area or anywhere in California to the knowledge of the biggest vending companies in the business."

Adam Burke, a member of the county's tobacco education coalition, had told council members on Sept. 10 that bars throughout San Jose used tokens.

"As one of the largest cigarette machine operators in San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, I was amused to hear that tokens were used to purchase cigarettes in many locations in my territory," wrote Jim Ham of Glenn-Rowe Vending Co. in a letter to Mathis-Swanson.

"I have been operating cigarette machines for over 23 years and have never seen a cigarette vending machine oper-

ated by tokens."

Burke acknowledged that he had mis-spoke at the meeting. Actually, he said, the tobacco education groups in San Jose are starting to look into that possibility.

Burke said the commission continues to support a total ban, but he thinks if the ordinance requires either tokens or that the machines be far from the door, it would be a positive outcome.

"The bottom line with me is kids and accessibility," said Burke.

Robert Orcutt of Valley Vending in Scotts Valley also wrote to Mathis-Swanson.

"Tokens are not used in San Jose," he said. "Rest assured, the City Council will see through the smoke screens ... created and act fairly and justly."

Orcutt also said that of the 11 machines used in bars in Santa Cruz, eight could not be converted to token usage because of age or style.

To convert the other three, he said, would cost about \$440.

Orcutt also could not be reached for further comment.

Councilman John Mahaney on Friday said he wanted all cigarette machines eliminated.

"I really don't understand the problem," said Mahaney. "Why buy a machine when you can sell them over the counter? ... I'm against the vending machines, period."

Mathis-Swanson said all 11 bar owners in the city already have voluntarily moved their machines at least 15 feet from any entrance or exit so they could be better monitored.

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— Neal Coonerty,
city councilman

"On the one hand, I feel I owe the City Council an apology over this token issue having gone so far," she said. "On the other hand, however, I merely said (at the Sept. 10 meeting) of the tokens, 'We've talked about looking into the idea.'"

She said her fight is not with the council, and praised members for being open-minded and having "bent over backward in an attempt to be fair."

Councilman Don Lane, who first presented the cigarette vending machine ordinance to the council, said, "It definitely wasn't a good move on their part to suggest it (tokens) and not mean it."

"I'm not sure what the council will do with it now," said Lane. "I'm not sure what I'll do with it."

The council will consider the issue at their evening session Tuesday, which begins at 7. The meeting will be in council chambers at City Hall.