

✓ Burning issue faces council

Santa Cruz likely to ban cigarette vending machines

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SANTA CRUZ — Thirteen-year-old Roger Post is what you might call a "for instance."

He's what supporters of a ban on cigarette machines are referring to when they say, "For instance, a kid could simply walk up and buy cigarettes without anyone seeing him."

Roger Post not only could — he has.

"My son is a smoker, largely because of the easy availability of cigarettes," wrote Colleen Post, who lives in Boulder Creek with her three children, in a letter to Mayor Jane Yokoyama.

"Now that the county has banned machines in the unincorporated areas of the county, my son, who has a bus pass for school, takes the bus into Santa Cruz to buy cigarettes from

vending machines."

Tonight, the City Council is expected to take a final vote on eliminating cigarette vending machines within the city limits.

Council members already have indicated they support making it harder for minors to buy cigarettes. In an initial vote on the issue more than a month ago, they even included bars in the proposed vending machine ban ordinance.

The only opposition to the ordinance came from bar owners, who accused the council of not being logical. No one under 21 is allowed inside such bars, they pointed out, and therefore wouldn't be buying cigarettes.

That argument persuaded the Board of Supervisors, when they passed a similar ordinance in mid-June that ended up covering only non-bar machines.

But city councils in Watsonville (the first to pass an ordinance) and Scotts Valley decided to include bar-based cigarette vending machines in their bans.

"We support them 100 percent in keeping cigarettes away from minors," said Beverly Mathis-Swanson, spokeswoman for Tavern Owners United for Fairness, a countywide group. "But it doesn't have to be an issue where someone loses."

Mathis-Swanson, who owns the One Double Oh Seven bar with her husband, Mark, said bars can't afford to risk losing their liquor licenses over being caught with minors on the premises.

But she acknowledged her side faces an uphill battle.

Please see VENDING — A12



Dan Coyro/Sentinel
Colleen Post and her son Roger at vending machine that sells candy and food in addition to cigarettes.

Vending machines

Continued from Page A1

"I'm afraid it's going to be very, very difficult for us to win this because emotions play too big a role," said Mathis-Swanson. "The council is going by their own preferences. I don't think they smoke."

Post said she wishes her son, Roger, didn't smoke, either. But his 1½-year-old habit was lighted, in part, by vending machines.

According to the young teenager, he was too afraid to ask someone to buy the cigarettes for him, so he sneaked them from vending machines.

Even though he lives in Boulder Creek, said Roger, a couple of handy cigarette machines were in Santa Cruz.

One of them, at the Exxon service station on Ocean Street, has candy in the same machine as the cigarettes.

A station worker who did not want to be named said, however, that he watches the youngsters when they go inside to use the machine.

"Getting rid of the vending machines helps because otherwise someone has to commit an illegal act (and buy cigarettes for a minor)," said Colleen Post.

In her letter to the mayor, Post was more emphatic.

"There will always be some slime-ball that is of age and will buy (cigarettes) for them," she wrote. "But if they are all behind counters or locked up, they cannot steal them, and if they are not available from machines they cannot buy them outright..."

Roger, an eighth-grader at San Lorenzo Valley Junior High School in Felton, said he has reached the point where "after a hard day of school, it relaxes my nerves" to smoke a cigarette.

"A kid would have to have the guts to ask someone to get them for them if there weren't any machines," said Roger, who was rec-

ognized by the Board of Supervisors this summer for his part in the junior volunteer program. He was an aide at a preschool.

Colleen Post said community support in the form of an ordinance would be part of the solution.

"He's totally clear on my feelings on it," she said about Roger's habit. "He's totally clear on the health hazards of it. ... He feels like he can't quit. If I find cigarettes at home, I get rid of them. He's not allowed to light up anywhere around me.

"But it's not something a parent is going to have total control over. That's why the community support is so important."

Although Post said she sympathizes with the plight of bar owners, she suggested they could sell cigarettes over the bar.

Mathis-Swanson said that bars could do that, but it would be most cost-effective to have the machines.

Two possible compromises, however, would be to have machines that accepted only tokens obtained at the bar, or to put the machines close enough to the bar that they could be better supervised.

"People generally have to get change anyway," said Mathis-Swanson. "We're not opposed to that (the tokens) solution."

She said bar owners are even more concerned that this is the first step in eventual government regulations banning smoking in public places — including bars.

Such an ordinance would cut into business, she said.

"A bar pretty much is a smoker's last haven," said Mathis-Swanson. "We just want to keep bars bars, and keep kids out."

The vote will be taken during the evening session of the council, which begins at 7 p.m. The meetings are in council chambers at City Hall.