

Undercover squad gets tough on tobacco sales

LISA QUEEN
Staff Reporter

Undercover teens and health inspectors are launching a sting operation this summer to crack down on York Region vendors selling cigarettes to minors.

Under a new mandatory provincial law, the region will hire three teens, ages 15 to 17, who will try to buy smokes from stores. Vendors are only allowed to sell cigarettes to adults 19 and over.

Under the program, one of the teen investigators will enter a store and ask for a pack of cigarettes.

If the youth is asked for identifi-

cation to prove he is an adult, he will say he forgot it. If the store refuses to sell the cigarettes, the teen will leave the store.

But if the youth is able to buy a pack, a public health inspector waiting outside or elsewhere in the store will lay charges.

The store faces a maximum fine of \$10,000. If caught a second time, the vendor can lose his licence to sell cigarettes.

According to health protection director Oryst Zyhar, the program will start this summer but will carry on year-round.

The health department will first target stores against which a com-

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plaint has been filed. However, random checks of other shops will also take place.

The teens will be expected to testify against the vendors in court, so court times will be arranged at the Newmarket Tannery courtroom that won't conflict with school hours.

But the concept of using minors has upset some councillors, who are worried about retribution against the youths.

"I'm very uncomfortable about this program," Georgina Mayor

Rob Grossi said. "I have some concerns of repercussions to that student."

Councillors are worried both the charged vendor and other teens who lose an easy place to buy cigarettes will retaliate against the teen investigators.

In fact, that fear led the health committee to approve danger pay for the teens. The salary has been increased to \$10 an hour, from the original proposal of \$7.50.

"I'm not going to do it for \$7.50 an hour," Grossi said. "You would have to pay me more if I'm going to stick my neck out."

But Zyhar said the youths won't

be in any danger because they won't be working in their home towns.

He also dismissed councillors' suggestions the program is nothing more than entrapment.

"We're not trying to trap anybody. We're just trying to follow who is selling illegally," Zyhar said.

A committee of five will choose the youths, who will have to look and dress like minors.

"You can't have a 15-year-old and make them up to look like a 25-year-old. That's entrapment," Zyhar said.

■ Please see page 3 ■



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