

City leaders want to ban flavored tobacco

Aug 01, 2011 6:24 PM EDT

By Sarah Hollenbeck

There is a new spin on traditional chewing tobacco, and it's being sold to area minors. You can find it in cherry, root beer and cool mint flavors and the city of Fort Myers wants it banned.

Despite the label's disclaimer, the Lee County Health Department says dissolvable tobacco – called Snus - is showing up in the lockers, backpacks and pockets of kids in Lee County.

It's bright colored, candy flavored and smells just like minty or fruity gum.

"I know that kids bring it to my school," said 17-year-old Sarah Stergeon, a student at East Lee County High School.

"Even if they're not using it themselves, their friends are - a lot of them are," said Holly Raven, Registered Nurse for the Lee County Health Department.

The spit-free, dissolvable tobacco comes in two forms - small pills or tiny tea bags. They're easily hidden in the back of a kid's mouth or in their belongings.

The health department says one major concern with the product is that it's easy to shove in a backpack or pocket and it looks like an ordinary mint tin.

Stergeon says her peers are bringing Snus to school - even though many of them are minors.

"It's very upsetting. It's breaking the law. It's like a death trap in a little box," she said.

And according to the Florida Division of Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco, some Lee County convenience stores have been busted for selling tobacco to minors within the past year.

Some stores even placed the tobacco cans in the candy aisle.

"It's upsetting. A lot of the companies and businesses in our county are not doing their job in carding these kids," said Students Working Against Tobacco Coordinator Daniel Gregory.

Now though, the City of Fort Myers is stepping in.

Monday, the Fort Myers City Council signed a resolution that urges tobacco retailers to stop selling and marketing all flavored tobacco in the city limits.

The hope is stores will voluntarily pull the products off the shelves. It's a small step, but Stergeon says she hopes retailers will take notice.

"They're not fooling anyone. We see what they're doing and we're going to stop it," she said.

By Sarah Hollenbeck