

TOP STORY

Smoke shop accused of selling vapes to minors, marijuana without a license

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Haley Lehman/News-Miner

Suzy's Smokes, Gifts & More, located on the Old Steese Highway, faces allegations of selling vapes and marijuana to minors and selling marijuana without a valid license, as pictured on Tuesday.

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Suzy's Smokes, Gifts & More faces allegations of selling vapes to minors and selling marijuana without a license.

The Alcohol and Marijuana Control Office seized approximately \$8,000 worth of marijuana and THC products on March 26 after an inspection from the Fairbanks Police Department and AMCO, but owners say they didn't do anything wrong.

Suzy's, located on the Old Steese Highway, was cited for selling products to minors containing nicotine, indecent exposure on premises open to minors for displaying graphic and sexually explicit items in the store where minors are allowed, selling drug paraphernalia to minors, and failing to have the correct registration. The investigation into the shop is ongoing.

The Fairbanks Police Department received a complaint in March after a teenage girl and her friend admitted to their parent that they purchased several vapes and a marijuana cartridge from Suzy's Smokes, Gifts & More, FPD spokesperson Teal Soden said. The minors were allegedly taken into a back room of the shop and shown sex toys and other sexually explicit materials.

Another adult reported in March that they saw several girls buy items from the shop without being asked for identification, Soden said.

A Fairbanks police officer and investigators from the Alcohol and Marijuana Control Board (AMCO) inspected the business on March 26 and found that they did not have the licensing to sell marijuana.

"The owner claimed that the kids would either tell him that their parents said it was OK to buy products there, or that they had been customers of the previous owner, and he didn't want to lose their business by turning them away," Soden said.

Fairbanks police posted on Facebook Friday that the owners said the products were "bought off Amazon" or "ordered off the internet."

AMCO seized approximately \$8,000 worth of marijuana and THC products from Suzy's. AMCO also seized between \$2,500-\$3,000 worth in hemp and THC products from Smokin' Deals on Airport Way that they were not authorized to sell.

"Products seized from Suzy's are products manufactured from hemp that were not endorsed by the Division of Agriculture through the Alaska Industrial Hemp Program," Kevin Richard, director of the Alcohol and Marijuana Control Office, said by email Wednesday. "Unendorsed THCA is not considered a legal or permitted cannabinoid by the Division of Agriculture."

Chanh Pham, who owns Suzy's Smoke Shop with his brother Ngoc Pham, denied the allegations and told the News-Miner Tuesday that he does not sell to minors.

Pham said that minors purchase press-on nails, candy, stickers and posters. He suspects that adults in the store saw minors purchasing these products and wrongly believed the store was selling vapes to juveniles.

He said that he told police officers "no, we don't sell [to minors]," when they inspected the business last week. "We know the rules."

Pham said that he works in the shop year round and does not card people he recognizes are regular customers, but he does card new customers and people who appear to be juveniles.

"They said I sell to minors but actually I don't sell to minors," he said.

When asked about the alleged sale of THCA, Pham said that the product is federally legal.

"We don't sell under the table," he said.

He added that they do not purchase products from Amazon, and purchase products from wholesalers.

Pham said that last week was the first time his business was inspected. He said English is his second language and he was "nervous."

Pham is consulting with an attorney, and said that he did not do something wrong.

Business has been slow for Suzy's Smoke Shop since the news broke. "Our regular customers [are] still coming," he said.

Minors will not be allowed on the side of the shop that sells sexually explicit items following the inspection.

Pham affirmed that he possesses the correct business licenses, pointing to three licenses framed above the counter.

The Phams have a business license issued by the Department of Commerce with an endorsement to sell tobacco products and electronic cigarettes, but they do not hold a marijuana license, according to state records.

Fairbanks City Attorney Thomas Chard said Wednesday that the city is still screening and processing the citations.

Suzy's Smoke Shop could be required to pay \$50-\$1,000 for each offense of selling drug paraphernalia to minors and to pay no more than \$600 or serve 60 days of imprisonment for indecent exposure, according to city code. According to Richard, "the Division of Agriculture and AMCO will review the products seized. Afterwards there may be civil fines or stop orders, destruction of an industrial hemp product not in compliance with regulation, and potentially coordination with peace officers for criminal prosecution."

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