

Public urges Wasilla council to pass Spice ban

By ZAZ HOLLANDER

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Packages of an herbal capsule called "Kratom" are sold at Wasilla's Wild Zone smoke shop. The store is one of six that could have been regulated under a proposed synthetic drug ban that failed to get approval from the Wasilla City Council Monday night, February 24, 2014.

WASILLA -- Wasilla needs a synthetic drug ordinance -- any synthetic drug ordinance.

That was the plea from a disappointed public that this week asked Wasilla's city council to reconsider last month's failed ban on synthetic drugs like Spice and bath salts that mimic the effects of illegal drugs but are sold at six stores within city limits.

Council members voted Monday evening to reintroduce the legislation despite an attempt to change direction by council member Brandon Wall, who continues to question the ban's scope.

State and federal drug agencies have criminalized some chemicals in the drugs but foreign manufacturers constantly switch formulas to stay ahead of the laws. Wasilla's proposed ordinance is modelled on one passed in Anchorage in January.

Authorities say the substances are unsafe because their chemical makeup is a mystery, and can trigger unpredictable emotional and health problems, including aggressive behavior, seizures and collapse. "Not for human consumption" labels allow them to bypass Food and Drug Administration review.

Anecdotally, the synthetic drug of choice in the Valley is Spice, created by spraying leafy plant matter with chemicals. It's often marketed like marijuana but can reportedly lead to psychosis, hallucinations or cardiac problems.

"Someone very close to me came this close to dying from Spice," local businessman Robert Friesen told the council during public testimony Monday, holding his thumb and index finger a quarter-inch apart. "Get rid of this stuff. You had a chance. You didn't do it."

The drug is "contributing to youth homelessness" in the Valley because parents can't control the violence and unprovoked rages of young people in withdrawal, said Michelle Overstreet, founder of Mat-Su Youth Housing, which operates a coffee shop and drop-in center for 14- to 24-year-olds about a block from Wasilla City Hall.

Overstreet told the council about a homeless youth, a talented piano player who entertained coffee shop patrons last fall, but then started smoking Spice. She said the substance caused medical problems that left him in a five-day coma. He emerged but isn't the same.

"He can play about 30 seconds of the stuff he used to be able to play by heart," Overstreet said. "He's lost. He's a lost boy."

Principals in Valley high schools are dealing with Spice along with other drugs, Mat-Su School Board member Ole Larson told the council.

"It's sold legally, and it's insane," Larson said. "I figure that we should maybe call meth 'shower gel' and we can sell that too."

Under Wasilla's proposed ban, police would issue a \$500 citation to people or business caught using or selling compounds with more than 150 different street names from AK47 and Dead Man Walking to The Hampster and Froge. The ordinance targets products that promise a high, or make reference to illicit street drugs and that cost more than other products marketed for the same use.

The council on Feb. 24 failed to pass a synthetic drug ban despite a 3-2 vote in favor: it takes four votes to pass legislation but council member Leone Harris was absent. Harris the next day said she would have voted in favor but couldn't attend the meeting.

The two votes against the ban, Wall and Clark Buswell, blamed overly broad language and said they worried about police overreach.

Wall on Monday lost a 4-1 vote to pull the ordinance off the consent agenda for discussion. He also failed to drum up any interest in holding a work session to look at other anti-synthetic drug strategies such as going after the business license of someone caught selling them as several other communities in California and New Mexico do.

Wall wrote a memo outlining his concerns that the proposal gives too much leeway for law enforcement with ill-defined boundaries on what's illegal. A citation doesn't afford the due process like a jury trial that more serious charges do but still shows up on someone's record even if the charge is dropped.

People who buy the drugs legally elsewhere may not know they're illegal in Wasilla -- most people don't even know where city limits start, he said.

"I would have absolutely no problem voting for this even with the issues I've got with this if it only affected businesses," Wall said. "But when we are possibly affecting a young person's future livelihood because of something they bought legally one or two miles outside the city limits, that causes me a lot of concern."

The council's vote against Wall's motion disappointed former council member Dianne Woodruff.

"Nobody in this room, nobody in this community wants to see it continue to be sold," Woodruff said. "However, I do understand there may be better ways to address it, more effective ways and it certainly wouldn't hurt to look at those."

Mayor Verne Rupright and Wasilla police Chief Gene Belden proposed the original ordinance. The revised ordinance is supported by the mayor, police chief and council members Colleen Sullivan-Leonard, David Wilson and Gretchen O'Barr.

State Sen. Kevin Meyer, R-Anchorage, has proposed an anti-synthetic drug measure on the state level. Soldotna is also considering one.

A public hearing has been scheduled for the Wasilla ordinance at 6 p.m. on April 14, according to city clerk Kristie Smithers.

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Read more here: <http://www.adn.com/2014/03/25/3393585/public-urges-wasilla-council-to.html#storylink=cpy>