

Assembly panel endorses smaller drug-free school zones with harsher terms

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TRENTON, N.J. -- The drug-free zones around schools and public places would be smaller, but carry stiffer penalties, under a bill approved Monday by an Assembly committee.

The 4-1 vote, with one abstention, came after the chairman of the state Commission to Review Criminal Sentencing assured legislators that the current 1,000-foot school zone (500 feet for public places) had effectively put entire cities in such zones and resulted in the law being applied almost exclusively to blacks and Hispanics.

"The laws as written don't work. They don't protect our children," said the commission chairman, retired state Superior Court Judge Barnett E. Hoffman. He said state and county prosecutors did not oppose the changes.

As the commission recommended, the revised law would provide a 200-foot drug-free zone around schools and public places. Offenders would face five to 10 years in prison, compared to three to five years under the current statute.

Judges, however, would have greater discretion, since the revised law would not set mandatory minimum sentences.

That provision would probably result in fewer people being incarcerated, said Assemblyman Jon M. Bramnick, R-Essex, Morris, Somerset and Union, who abstained.

The lone nay vote came from Assemblyman Brian E. Rumpf, R-Atlantic, Burlington and Ocean. He asked Hoffman why municipalities could not determine for themselves whether to adopt the smaller zones.

Hoffman said that would create an unworkable patchwork.

The bill, sponsored by Assemblyman Peter J. Barnes, D-Middlesex, and Assemblywoman Mary T. Previte, D-Camden, now goes to the full Assembly. It has not yet been introduced in the Senate.

Time is fleeting, as the legislative session expires Jan. 10. Bills not passed by the Senate and the Assembly by

Jan. 9 must be reintroduced.

The drug-free zones were created in response to the crack cocaine explosion in the late 1980s to discourage drug trafficking near concentrations of children.

All eight witnesses before Barnes' Law and Public Safety Committee supported revising the law.

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