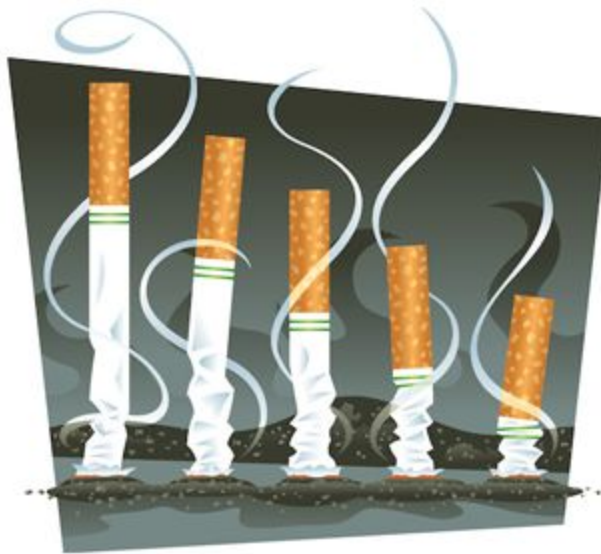


## Tobacco retail licensing is needed

April 10, 2022



Do we need local controls for tobacco?

This is the question our Board of Supervisors and City Council members explored, without taking action, at their joint meeting on March 29.

I was asked to comment on this issue as the Project Director for California Health Collaborative's NorCal 4 Health project, which is a five-year project that is funded by the California Tobacco Control Program.

Our project provides community education regarding tobacco use, the harms, and tools a community can use to address these. There are currently six other funded tobacco education prevention projects working in Del Norte County. This alone should warn us that tobacco and nicotine addiction is no ordinary problem.

According to the California Department of Public Health In the last 12 years, Del Norte County has had one of the highest adult smoking rates in the state of California. All this while having funded tobacco education programs, working in our schools, our community, our doctors' offices, and law enforcement for more than 20 years.

In the last seven years vaping has entered our local scene, and our education and prevention efforts so far haven't been enough. The California Healthy Kids Survey reports that Del Norte County's youth vaping rates have continued to rise each year. As of the 2020-21 school year:

- 1 out of 10 seventh graders (11 and 12-year-olds) have vaped;
- 1 in 5 eleventh graders have vaped;
- 1 in 2 nontraditional students have vaped in the last 30 days.

In a presentation given by Dr. DeNoble, a leading addiction scientist, he stated that in 1979 his lab found that it only takes 41 milligrams of nicotine to rewire the brain and cause addiction. Interestingly enough just one Juul (a popular vaping device among youth) contains 41 milligrams of nicotine.

There is no regulation by the FDA on nicotine levels in these devices so they can vary and far exceed 41 milligrams.

Tobacco companies often use nicotine salts in vapes which allow for higher concentrations to be inhaled and absorbed more quickly than regular nicotine. This interferes with a growing brain. Nicotine changes the way connections form in the brain, and exposure to this while the brain is growing – up until around the age of 24 years old -- makes youth more susceptible to addiction.

Tobacco companies know that 90 percent of smokers today started before they were 18. It is well documented that Big Tobacco has used this knowledge for over 60 years. In a 1969 draft report, “Why One Smokes,” Phillip Morris company is quoted:

“Smoking a cigarette for the beginner is a symbolic act.... ‘I am no longer my mother’s child, I’m tough, I am an adventurer, I’m not square.’ ...As the force from psychological symbolism subsides, the pharmacological effect takes over to sustain the habit.”

With Big tobacco spending, \$8.4 billion a year in marketing, and 97.4 percent of that is spent at the point of sale, it’s no wonder these products seem “not that bad.” Big Tobacco has many years of experience and know-how when it comes to marketing, creating environments, and social norms.

This is even more apparent in rural communities, such as ours, where there are no local protections to combat Big Tobacco’s marketing dollars. It seems hard to truly believe they are actually spending that much or have that much influence in our small town, right? But they do.

There are 11 places within two miles of the Crescent City limits where someone can purchase tobacco. There are 26 locations, if you include the entire county. In each of these locations, Big Tobacco places signs and posters inside and outside of these stores, on the gas station fences, gas pumps, windows, and walls.

Big Tobacco pays for counter mats, change cups, shelving displays, coupons, price discounts, and promotional payments to retailers to have their products placed in specific store locations, like the wall behind the cash register.

With so many places for people to see their products, it is no wonder why young people think tobacco and nicotine products are just a normal part of childhood experimentation.

In Del Norte County there is greater density of tobacco stores with 93 stores selling tobacco per 100,000 residents, versus 79.6 stores per 100,000 residents across California. Rural county stores were found to be significantly more likely to advertise at least one discount for chewing tobacco and vaping products, which appeals to price-sensitive consumers, including youth.

Big tobacco has strong roots in rural communities. It is, unfortunately, up to our under-resourced communities to address the unfair targeting by Big Tobacco. A tobacco retail license is a public health recommended best practice for communities addressing tobacco use prevention.

Policies reducing tobacco retailer density are effective in reducing or eliminating inequities in the location and distribution of tobacco retailers. Restricting access to flavored tobacco has also been shown to reduce youth use.

In an evaluation of New York City's law, which prohibited the sale of all flavored tobacco, excluding menthol, it was found that as a result of the law, youth had 37% lower odds of ever trying flavored tobacco products and 28% lower odds of ever using any type of tobacco.

So I ask the community, if the six tobacco use prevention programs haven't been able to curb our youth's increase in vaping rates, then should we add another tool to our toolbox? That is the question our elected officials were trying to answer on March 29, but unfortunately, they did not take any action.

The community was left with the consensus being to do nothing and with comments like, "kids will be kids," and warnings that this is a "slippery slope to government overreach."

The conversations quickly lead to political party values and fictitious ideas of "where will government overreach end?" While it is important to not lose sight of the big picture, the problem with this particular discussion is that we lost sight of the actual problem happening with our youth.

One piece of information missing from the current conversation is the serious lifelong addiction nicotine has on our youth, and the chronic lifelong health effects and tolls it has on our community.

There was no discussion on how tobacco-related deaths are nearly five times higher a year than drug overdose-related deaths, or that tobacco-related deaths are five times higher than alcohol-related deaths, or 13 times higher a year than car accident deaths.

This is not an ordinary problem; tobacco is the number one preventative cause of death and chronic disease in America. I hope that our elected officials will decide to have another meeting and to problem-solve the best options for our community to protect our youth from this addictive product.

If we recognize that our little community has six local programs trying to educate and prevent youth use, and all the while we are having more and more youth vaping, then we must do something more.

If you are interested in getting involved, please attend the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Del Norte. You can call (707) 951-2914 or email [info@tobaccofreedelnorte.org](mailto:info@tobaccofreedelnorte.org) for the next meeting and location details. Or

attend an informational meeting on April 23, 10 a.m. to 12:00 at Del Norte High School, Room A-2. Or better yet, voice your opinion at your next city council or board of supervisors meeting.

This is your home and your kids. So please take this information and decide for yourself. Do you want to add local controls to protect our youth from Big Tobacco?