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Public health advocates mount full-court press to save Chicago ban on flavored tobacco products

Some store owners have accused Ald. Matt O'Shea of "kicking them when they're down." As for specific changes O'Shea is willing to make in his ordinance, he said there's talk of exempting hookah products and menthol cigarettes.

By Fran Spielman | Jul 14, 2020, 5:46pm CDT



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A proposal to ban flavored tobacco products in the city of Chicago has stalled in a City Council committee. | AP

Warning of dire consequences for Chicago's youth, public health experts mounted a full court press on Tuesday to salvage a citywide ban on flavored tobacco products stalled by an avalanche of opposition.

Ald. Matt O'Shea (19th), one of Mayor Lori Lightfoot's closest City Council allies, led the charge in arguing that the "undeniable link between COVID-19 and pulmonary issues" demands an immediate ban on all flavored tobacco products, including menthol.

The alderman argued that youth tobacco use has "skyrocketed" over the past several years — to the point where two-thirds of high school students report using flavored tobacco products.

"Flavored tobacco is used to hook young people on extremely addictive products. ... The Centers for Disease Control report that, if current tobacco usage trends continue, more than five million Americans currently under the age of 18 will die of a tobacco related illness. That's about one in every 13 Americans who, today, are younger than 17," O'Shea said.

As a father of three young children, O'Shea said he's frightened by those statistics.

"I don't mind people asking me, 'Why now, Matt?' It's a question I'm happy to answer because there are plenty of reasons why now is the right time to do this. As a father sitting across the dinner table from my children each night, the question I can't seem to answer is, 'What the hell took so long?'" he said.

Bishop Horace Smith of the Apostolic Faith Church is a doctor at Lurie Children's Hospital and a member of the Chicago Board of Health.

Smith argued that tobacco companies have "targeted urban black children. ... They know that they respond to flavored tobacco and menthol."

"These are killing our kids. ... It's a moral outrage. We must stop this," Smith said.

A pediatric oncologist, Smith argued those who wonder why the blanket ban targets

“adults who have the ability to make a choice” are “missing the point.”

“These people are dying now because they started ... in their young teenage years. It is clear they become hooked early on because of the rush of nicotine and menthol and other flavors that enhance the absorption of nicotine to your body to your brain,” he said.

“Four months ago ... many of us were appalled — and too many were surprised — by the increased numbers of African-Americans and Brown persons who were dying from COVID. We should not have been surprised. ... The underlying issues were things like asthma, chronic lung disease, diabetes, cardiac disease — many of them attributable to tobacco use.”

Father Michael Pflieger said it’s no surprise Big Tobacco has made the “business decision” to target young people with flavored tobacco products and “heavy menthol” cigarettes.

“As more and more knowledge is put out there by heart and lung associations about the dangers of tobacco, more and more older people are either stopping smoking or preventing themselves from starting smoking,” Pflieger said.

“So, what do they do? They try to target and prey on the young people ... who haven’t got the understanding of it and feel like they’re invincible and nothing can happen to them. It must be banned. It must be stopped.”

Owners of gas stations, convenience stores and tobacco stores — and trade groups representing them — have accused O’Shea of legislative overreach and kicking them when they’re down.

They have argued that the last thing small businesses need when they’re fighting for survival after the stay-at-home shutdown and the damage caused by civil unrest is a citywide ban on flavored tobacco that would cost them even more business.

O’Shea responded by saying he’s open to amendments.

“We have had discussions about exempting hookah products. Some folks have discussed an exemption for menthol cigarettes,” O’Shea said when asked for specifics.

But, he added, his “preference is to include menthol to fully realize the health benefits.”

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By Miriam Di Nunzio | May 9, 2022, 12:05pm CDT

WHITE SOX

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CRIME

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BEARS

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UKRAINE

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By Associated Press | May 9, 2022, 11:04am CDT
