

Tobacco Retailer - Testimony - HF904

My name is Maher Safi, I own and operate several age restricted Tobacco Shops around the Twin Cities. I believe as an adult over the age of 21 in America, I have the right to make my own choices and decisions when it comes to my personal health.

The law now is clear. State and Federal law already prohibits all tobacco products sales to anyone under the age of 21. The timing of this proposal to ban Flavored Tobacco Products in Minnesota is not urgent. You must allow 21+ Law which was recently enacted by the Feds and The State to work. This proposal should not be allowed to pass for another reason. Currently Cigarettes, RYO and Chewing Tobacco are not allowed to be shipped to consumers. That is the Law; Effective in Mid-March of 2021 a newly enacted Federal law will go into effect and will ban shipment of ALL Other Tobacco Products by the USPS and further restricts other Carriers from shipping these products. The data will come out next year, and the result will show that Youth use of Tobacco Products has been significantly reduced as a result of these laws.

Currently Advertising of Cigarettes and most other tobacco products is Illegal in America. We understand that few decades ago Tobacco companies advertised Menthol to Blacks. That was a racist act. They were sued by the States and since the 90's they are not allowed to advertise any Cigarettes or Tobacco in America.

I believe that restricting and limiting access now to Black American adults who choose to consume a legal flavored tobacco product, such as Menthol or any other none tobacco product is the definition of racist itself.

Restricting access to Blacks and forcing them to go out of their way to purchase a legal product is racist, and unfair to these adult residents. Remember you are singling out Menthol and other flavors from a huge list of other tobacco products. Would you dare to ban Regular Marlboro Cigarettes which is widely used by Whites?

I know this retail industry very well. I own stores in Black areas, and others in Suburban and Rural areas. People who smoke Menthol are not going to simply switch to regular Cigarettes. Currently Newport Cigarettes and Flavored Cigars are being illegally sold online as well as on the streets, because some Cities decided to ban them. I urge you to not create a black market for this product in Minnesota, and turn Law abiding residents into criminals. First, they start selling illegal tobacco then they move on to selling other illegal drugs. For some this becomes a way of life as it provides a way to get rich fast by selling illegal cigarettes on the streets. If you ban Flavored Tobacco Products then Adults who choose to smoke these currently legal products will be able to still purchase them legally from out of State, and then turn around and illegally sell them to their friends on Snap Chat for a lucrative profit. Nicotine is an addictive chemical. Similar to other drugs, the solution is that people need more help to quit smoking, not a full prohibition on Menthol and other flavors for a group of people in our State.

Furthermore, most businesses that sell Tobacco Products whether it's a grocery store or a Tobacco Shop in the Twin City area are owned and operated by minorities. Minority small businesses are not big tobacco. These business owners' livelihoods will be at stake here. You should not ban these products because, business owners made major commitments. They signed legally binding long-term leases with their landlords, they took on debts, and in some cases, this is their only source of income and the only job they know.

Businesses operate on a small margin. Flavored Tobacco Products sales are in some cases over 15% in gas stations to 40% of their overall Tobacco sales. If you allow this legislation to pass, know that you will be shutting down hundreds of businesses and depriving the state of Minnesota from collecting hundreds of millions of tax dollars that are needed today to fight the epidemic and keep jobs in our state. How would you compensate for the estimated 400 million dollars in lost revenue for the State?

Finally; I would like to propose amendments, and real solutions that will work for the majority of residents and businesses alike. These suggestions accomplish a major reduction in Youth access to Flavored Tobacco Products while still maintaining survival of our local businesses in Minnesota.

- First, to allow age restricted stores, to sell all legal flavored tobacco products to adults who are over the age of 21.
- Second, create a State Licensing mechanism for Tobacco businesses, and limit the number of Tobacco Licenses in a certain population radius.
- Third, to restrict and continue to allow other small grocery stores and gas stations to continue to sell only Menthol tobacco.
- Fourth, to Ban the online sales of all tobacco products from coming into our State.
- Fifth, to Ban the advertisement of all tobacco products including Vape products on TV, Radio or social media.
- Sixth, to spend more money on educating the public to curb youth use of tobacco. Not prohibition!

Sincerely

Maher Safi



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