

**Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota**

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September 24, 2018

Chair Gloria Bogan and members of the Board of Zoning Appeals  
Attn: Jerome Benner II  
Department of Safety and Inspections  
375 Jackson Street, Suite 220 St. Paul, MN 55101

Re: Little Grocery (#18-092702) 1724 University Avenue West

Dear Chair Bogan and members of the Board of Zoning Appeals

I am writing to urge you to reconsider the zoning variance you recently granted to the above applicant. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota was one of 57 organizations that supported the passage of the menthol tobacco restriction ordinance. The approval of this zoning variance undermines the aim of the ordinance – to limit access of tobacco by youth, who are especially vulnerable to exposure to these addictive products.

As the largest health plan in Minnesota, Blue Cross is committed to improving the health of all Minnesotans, which is why we strongly support local policy change to keep youth away from the harms of tobacco.

We understand that another tobacco shop was also approved for a zoning variance, citing “practical difficulties,” just as Little Grocery did. These zoning variances set a dangerous precedent, allowing tobacco shops to proliferate in neighborhoods already dealing with deliberate targeting from the tobacco industry.

St. Paul City Council was very cognizant of the potential ways retailers could work around the menthol ordinance and have passed a cap on the number of tobacco shop licenses as well as the tobacco shop ordinance. These ordinances reflect the clear commitment of the City Council and the residents they represent to put the health of the community above profits from commercial tobacco.

I know you have heard about the potential economic losses that the retailers claim to face because of this ordinance. However, I would like to remind you that, in addition to the yearly **\$3.2 billion** it costs Minnesotans to treat diseases caused by smoking, it costs Minnesota businesses and **\$4.3 billion in lost productivity** because of the loss of earnings due to premature death. The staggering costs of tobacco in both health care costs and loss of life cannot be compared to the loss of profits for those who want to continue to sell these lethal products.

I hope you will take this positive step toward making a smoke-free generation for St. Paul youth and overturn the zoning variance approval.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Janelle Wilcox". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vice President, Community Health and Health Equity  
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota  
Co-chair, Minnesotans for a Smoke-free Generation  
smokefreegenmn.org

[bluecrossmn.com](http://bluecrossmn.com)