



Minnesota
Department
of Health

November 10, 2015

Council President Stark and Members of the Saint Paul City Council
Saint Paul City Council
310 City Hall-County Courthouse
15 West Kellogg Boulevard
Saint Paul, MN 55102-1615

Dear Council President Stark and Members of the Saint Paul City Council:

I am writing in support of the proposal to limit the sale of flavored tobacco products to adult-only stores in the city of Saint Paul. Flavored tobacco products pose a serious health threat to youth and this proposal will significantly address the problem and help protect youth.

Tobacco continues to be the leading cause of death and disease in Minnesota. One of our main goals at the Minnesota Department of Health is to prevent youth from initiating use of tobacco products. We know that roughly 90 percent of smokers start before they turn 18. If we take important steps like limiting youth access to flavored tobacco products, we will prevent young people from becoming smokers and save thousands of lives in the years to come. The proposal will also strengthen efforts to address the health disparities in our communities most heavily impacted by the burden of tobacco.

Flavored tobacco poses a significant health risk, particularly to youth. Young smokers report choosing flavored tobacco products over cigarettes because they “taste better” and are perceived to be “safer.” Candy and fruit flavored tobacco products mask the harsh taste of tobacco and are attractive to youth. Tobacco companies use the same flavor chemicals in their sweet flavored tobacco products that are used in popular candy and drink products like LifeSavers™, Jolly Ranchers™ and Kool-Aid™.

Data show that youth increasingly use flavors in a variety of tobacco-related products including electronic cigarettes, cheap cigarillos and hookahs. A recent 28.4 percent of youth in Minnesota report having tried electronic cigarettes, most of which are available in a wide range of flavors that appeal to youth like cotton candy, chocolate and Hello Kitty™. Youth are also twice as likely as their older counterparts to be cigar or cigarillo smokers. In addition, nearly one in five (18.4 percent) Minnesota high school students has tried using a hookah, which typically includes flavored shisha. The tobacco products may differ, but the marketing approach is the same – using candy, fruit and other flavored tobacco to attract and addict youth.

Flavored tobacco products are also widely available in stores where kids shop every day including convenience stores, gas stations, pharmacies and corner stores. A recent Saint Paul assessment found that flavored tobacco is available in over 80 percent of retailers that sell tobacco. Research has proven that youth exposure to tobacco marketing and access to products increases initiation and use. The proposal would dramatically reduce the number of stores where kids are exposed to flavored tobacco

products and marketing. This is a focused, common sense strategy to address this public health problem.

The proposal is a critical step toward limiting youth access to flavored tobacco products and will help prevent the next generation of smokers. I applaud the Saint Paul City Council for taking these important steps to protect our youth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edward P. Ehlinger". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Edward P. Ehlinger, MD, MSPH
Commissioner
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