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Support soda tax, oppose flavored tobacco ban

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com



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While I support a proposed statewide soda tax increase, I am against Sacramento's proposed ban on selling flavored tobacco and vaping products. Here's why:

Soda taxes have reduced sugary drink sales and have raised money for needed health programs. Data from Berkeley, Philadelphia and Mexico clearly demonstrates that such taxes significantly and quickly reduce sales and consumption of sugary drinks.

Drinking sodas is linked to many health problems, including diabetes, heart disease, asthma, dental disease and obesity. Americans will reach into their pockets and pull out \$237 billion a year for the direct costs of treating diabetes alone, and then will still need to cover \$90 billion for diabetes-related losses in productivity, according to the American Diabetes Association.

In addition to lowering consumption, soda taxes bring in significant revenues. In California, a proposal to add a 2-cent tax per ounce on soda and other sugary drinks would raise an estimated \$2 billion a year.

So the soda tax accomplishes two major goals. First, it reduces consumption of products with severe health consequences. And second, it raises money to treat those same health consequences.

Tobacco use also has severe health impacts. There is less clarity about vaping products, though most experts agree that they are 80 percent to 95 percent less harmful than cigarettes. And there are concerns about the increasing use of vaping products by teenagers, even though it is illegal to sell these products to anyone under age 21.

However, I do not believe the proposed city ban on selling flavored tobacco and vaping products to adults is a good idea. First, it should be clear after trying to ban marijuana for the last half a century, bans do not work as well as regulation and taxation.

I sincerely doubt that people will stop smoking or vaping because of the city ban. What will happen is that residents and visitors, who the industry says are buying \$110 million a year of flavored tobacco and vaping products in Sacramento, will buy their products elsewhere or online. As a result, Sacramento's small stores, many of which are struggling, will take a severe hit, losing tobacco and vape product sales, as well as gas and food items often purchased at the same time.

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Last week, the American Petroleum and Convenience Store Association ran an ad in SN&R conveying its concerns. These sales will simply shift from Sacramento to surrounding cities. And the city of Sacramento will lose more than \$2 million in sales tax revenue a year.

Let's focus instead on increasing penalties and enforcement against those retailers who illegally sell these products to minors.

However, soda taxes have a proven track record. Let's enact a soda tax in California. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.



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