

Dear Chairman Davis and Members of the House Economic Matters Committee:

I am writing to you on behalf of Montgomery County Students Towards Equitable Public Schools (STEPS) to support SB 177 - "Business Regulation - Flavored Tobacco Products - Prohibition" and to extend our appreciation to the Committee for giving this issue the time and consideration it deserves. Montgomery County STEPS is a youth organization of students across the county working towards equity. After extensively discussing the issue with other student leaders I strongly believe that flavored tobacco is a major problem for the residents of Maryland. The experiences of students suffering from tobacco addictions, racialized marketing strategies, and the health impact that flavored tobacco has on the residents of Maryland shows that flavored tobacco products should be prohibited in the state of Maryland.

First, students are suffering from tobacco addictions, due to targeted marketing. For example, 23% of highschool students use e - cigarettes and 1,400 new kids under 18 smoke each year. Also, hundreds of national and state studies show that smoking of any kind is detrimental to the health and well - being of smokers. This shows that student's bright futures are being destroyed by tobacco products. Additionally, tobacco company's marketing strategies target youth urging them to try smoking. For instance, hundreds of sponsored social media posts portray teens smoking as cool and needed. Furthermore, flavored tobacco products like bubblegum and popcorn hide the deadly toxins that are being consumed, are targeted towards kids, and increase the probability of someone becoming an addict.

Next, tobacco companies have for decades pursued explicitly racialized marketing strategies for menthol cigarettes, the most widespread flavored tobacco product. Research on advertising and pricing confirm that this strategy continues today. Targeted cigarette advertising toward Black Americans has contributed to a range of racialized health disparities. Additionally, tobacco companies target black communities by giving out free samples in majority black communities, lowering prices, and targeted ads. This demonstrates that flavored tobacco increases racial inequities and disproportionately affects people of color.

Lastly, there are major economic benefits and minimal losses from prohibiting flavored tobacco products. For instance, families are likely to recycle a significant share of any savings from reduced tobacco consumption into purchases of other goods and services, reducing the size of the economic impact of a prohibition. Annual health care costs in Maryland directly caused by smoking amounts to a whopping 2.71 billion dollars. This indicates that the prohibition of flavored tobacco would save thousands of household's money to spend on necessary needs, ergo reducing the economic impacts of the prohibition. Additionally, there would be minimal job losses due to the prohibition of tobacco. Most tobacco sales are concentrated in two types of retailers: convenience stores/gas stations and vape shops that are solely dedicated for the sale e -cigarettes. Evidence from a 2011 study found no impact of long - term declines in cigarette consumption on convenience store jobs. Also, vape shops are estimated to employ a couple hundred workers in Maryland, but with an average salary of only about \$22,000. This shows that the prohibition of flavored tobacco products would have minimal impacts on jobs, but would bring major economic benefits to Maryland households.

The sale of flavored tobacco products undeniably increases the suffering of Black communities as well as the prevalence of youth addiction to tobacco products. We can do something about it. I urge you to support the passage of a clean SB 177 - "Business Regulation - Flavored Tobacco Products - Prohibition."

Respectfully Submitted,

Parim Shah

Montgomery County Students Towards Equitable Public Schools (STEPS)