

# Our Opinion: Raise age to buy, use tobacco to 21

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In a legislative session where lawmakers will need to close a budget gap of more than \$1.5 billion, we're wary of any measure that cuts a stable source of tax revenue.

But, when those tax dollars come from kids who are harming themselves, we focus less on dollars and more on common sense.

That's why we're heartened to see the bipartisan support for Senate Bill 754, which would raise the legal age to purchase and use tobacco in Oregon from 18 to 21.

This bill, which easily passed the Senate on March 23, is not about personal liberty. It's not about being old enough to serve in the military. It's about saving lives.

Deaths from tobacco use are the No. 1 preventable cause of death in Oregon, according to the state Public Health Division, and most people start smoking before they turn 20.

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Where do youngsters get their first cigarettes? From older teenagers, of course — so the impact of Senate Bill 754 could extend to much younger Oregonians than a simple reading of the bill suggests.

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 90 percent of all adult smokers began smoking before leaving their teens.

So stop a person from being a smoker at age 18, or 19, or even 20, and there's an excellent chance you've stopped that person from ever being a smoker.

Don't take our word for it. The Oregon Legislative Revenue office estimates that the decline in tobacco taxes will grow from about \$800,000 in 2019 to \$2.7 million in 2023. Why? Because analysts expect the number of adult smokers in Oregon to drop if we make it harder for teens to legally buy a pack of cigarettes.

And, it's likely that the loss in tax revenue will be outweighed by savings in precious health care dollars down the road.

That's why California and Hawaii already have statewide laws raising the age of use and sales to 21.

Lane County also has adopted the rule — commonly referred to as Tobacco 21 or T-21 — and Multnomah County Commissioner Sharon Meieran, an emergency room physician, will move a similar measure forward in her county if Senate Bill 754 stalls.

Meieran is just one of several physicians in public office supporting Oregon's T-21 proposal.

Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, a Democratic doctor from Beaverton, is a chief sponsor; Rep. Knute Buehler, a Republican physician from Bend, is a sponsor in the House.

And, they have a powerful ally on Portland's Pill Hill.

"If you can delay the start of a tobacco habit by even a few years, fewer young people will become addicted to tobacco, which means fewer cancer patients in the future," says Dr. Brian Druker, director of Oregon Health & Science University's Knight Cancer Institute. "The bottom line is that Tobacco 21 will save the lives of Oregonians."

That's a bottom line we all can live with.