


# Gazette editorial: The sooner you get 'em hooked ...

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The Oregon Legislature has voted to raise the legal age to buy tobacco to 21, and Oregon Gov. Kate Brown is expected to sign the bill, making Oregon the third state, after Hawaii and California, to enact such a law. At least 250 cities and counties have also restricted tobacco sales this way, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

In West Virginia this year, addiction and disease won the argument.

A similar bill passed the Senate Health and Human Resources Committee but died in Senate Finance.

The debate was pretty telling.

Lead sponsor Sen. Ron Stollings, D-Boone, said in a Beckley Register-Herald story:

“The No. 1 driver of health care costs is tobacco, followed by obesity. In a state arguably the least healthy population in the country — our Medicaid population and PEIA population are very unhealthy — we lead in tobacco use and we’re fourth in obesity. ... If this bill can pass, it would arguably be one of the biggest public health bills this Legislature has passed in a decade or 25 years.”

Sen. Robert Karnes, R-Upshur, noted that the state could lose at least \$6 million in tobacco taxes, and amazingly, despite research and experience to the contrary, announced that such a law wouldn’t prevent under-21-year-olds from smoking. Critics called it “political correctness” and government overreach, trying to dictate behavior to adults.

As we learned when this subject arose last year, West Virginia did actually set the legal age to buy tobacco at 21 a century ago.

In 1913, the Legislature banned selling cigarettes or cigarette papers to anyone under age 21. They were not allowed to possess or smoke tobacco. Smoking was not allowed in school buildings or on school grounds. Lawmakers of the time seemed to believe that smoking cigarettes was not healthy.

But that was before tobacco industry marketers got really organized and spent half a century obfuscating the truth about tobacco effects on the body.

In 1972, the West Virginia Legislature lowered the age to buy tobacco to 18 just after the voting age was lowered to 18.

New Jersey has a tobacco bill waiting for its governor’s signature, and similar bills are in various stages in Maine and Massachusetts.

“We know that about 95 percent of adult smokers began smoking before they turned 21,” says a statement from Matthew L. Myers, president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. “Increasing the tobacco age will help counter the industry’s efforts to target young people at a critical time when many move from experimenting with tobacco to regular smoking.”

In West Virginia, about 18.8 percent of high school students smoke, compared with 8 percent nationally. Among adults, 25.7 percent smoke in West Virginia, compared to 15 percent nationally, according to the [Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids](#). West Virginia gains about 1,300 new daily smokers under age 18 every year.

For the health of West Virginians, we hope conscientious lawmakers keep bringing up this issue. If the shortened lives of today’s kids aren’t a motivation to discourage their forming an addiction, perhaps people would like to save

some of the \$277 million in smoking-related Medicaid costs, or the billion in other health costs, or the lost productivity. Any reason will do.

Speaking of smoking and kids, the American Academy of Pediatrics has issued a statement expressing disappointment to American filmmakers and urging those who depict smoking in movies for kids to warn viewers of smoking dangers and to put R ratings on movies with smoking.

The statement came after the U.S. Surgeon General concluded last week that there is a causal relationship between smoking in movies and young people beginning to smoke. The more kids see smoking on their screens, the more likely they are to start, says a report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Heavy exposure makes kids two to three times more likely to smoke than children who are less exposed.

The number of top-grossing films that show smoking has actually decreased, the CDC reported, but the number of smoking incidents in films rated PG-13 increased 43 percent between 2010 and 2016.

“An R rating for movies with tobacco use could potentially reduce the number of teen smokers by 18 percent and prevent their premature deaths from tobacco-related diseases,” the CDC says.