

# Ann Arbor can lead way for curbing tobacco use by raising legal buying age

 [mlive.com/opinion/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2016/08/ann\\_arbor\\_can\\_lead\\_way\\_for\\_cur.html](http://mlive.com/opinion/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2016/08/ann_arbor_can_lead_way_for_cur.html)



A cigarette pack with an ominous warning label laying on the street in downtown Ann Arbor. City Council is scheduled to vote today on raising the legal age for tobacco sales to 21. (Ryan Stanton | *The Ann Arbor News*)

*Bill Lee is executive vice president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.*

*If you have a guest column to share, email [Opinion Curator Dan Hawkins](mailto:Opinion Curator Dan Hawkins). And be sure to check out our [guidelines for submission](#).*

Bill Lee

## **By Bill Lee**

Tobacco use continues to threaten the health and well-being of Ann Arbor residents, so we must do everything we can to prevent it among young people. Increasing the legal age of sale of tobacco products to 21 is a promising new approach that will reduce tobacco use among young people, save lives and help create the first tobacco-free generation.

A recent [Washtenaw County survey](#) found an increase in tobacco use in the Ann Arbor area in 2015, the first uptick since the county started recording this data over 20 years ago. Such findings make the case for strong action.

Raising the legal age to 21 will reduce tobacco use among young adults — when nearly all of it begins — who are heavily targeted by the tobacco industry and when many move from experimenting with tobacco to regular smoking. Nationally, about 95 percent of adult smokers began smoking before they turned 21. If we keep them from smoking as kids, then most will never start. Raising the age to 21 will also help keep tobacco out of high schools, where younger teens often obtain it from older students.

Council Member Julie Grand has introduced such a proposal before the Ann Arbor City Council, which is scheduled to consider it today. Grand holds a doctorate from the University of Michigan's School of Public Health and teaches health policy at UM-Dearborn.

Tobacco use is the nation's leading preventable cause of death. It kills nearly half a million people and costs us about \$170 billion in health care bills every year. In Michigan, its annual toll is more than 16,000 deaths and over \$4.5 billion in health care costs. Without effective action, 213,000 kids now younger than 18 in Michigan will ultimately die prematurely from smoking. That's more than 10 times the number of kids who live in Ann Arbor today.

A [March 2015 report](#) by the national Institute of Medicine concluded that raising the tobacco age to 21 will have a substantial positive impact on public health. It will significantly reduce the number of adolescents and young adults who start smoking, reduce smoking-caused deaths and immediately improve the health of adolescents, young adults and young mothers who would be deterred from smoking, as well as their children. The report predicts that raising the tobacco age will, over time, reduce the smoking rate by 12 percent and smoking-related deaths by 10 percent, saving 223,000 lives.

The only hint of opposition comes from those who worry that the measure might [violate Michigan's Tobacco Products Tax Act](#) of 1993. This is not the case. When Michigan placed limits on how tobacco distributors are regulated, the intent was to assist the state in uniform tax collection — not to protect the tobacco industry by eliminating all local control over the retail sale of tobacco. While there are some limits to how tobacco distributors are regulated, the 1993 law does not prevent officials from regulating retail sales at a local level.

There is [growing momentum](#) nationwide to raise the tobacco age, with California, Hawaii and at least 170 cities and counties in 13 states having enacted such laws. Ann Arbor can become the first city in Michigan to do so, setting the stage for Washtenaw County and the state.

By raising the tobacco age to 21, Ann Arbor can prevent young people from ever using tobacco, creating a stronger and healthier community for all.