

# Raise the smoking age

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Sid Leiken made a logical-sounding argument when he declined to join his four colleagues on the Lane County Board of Commissioners in voting to direct the county staff to prepare an ordinance raising the age for legal tobacco sales to 21 from 18. Leiken said Lane County shouldn't make itself an "island" — action to raise the minimum age ought to come at the state level.

Leiken is right; Oregon should join California and Hawaii in banning tobacco sales to people younger than 21. But in the meantime, there's nothing wrong with becoming an island of rational public-health policy.

In fact, islands can be healthful places to live. In 2005 the city of Needham, Mass., became the first jurisdiction in the United States to raise the age for legal tobacco purchases to 21. Skeptics scoffed that teenagers could simply buy cigarettes in any of a dozen neighboring Boston suburbs. But by 2010, smoking among high school students in Needham had dropped by more than half, while the rates in nearby towns showed only slight declines. Needham had made itself an island of addiction avoidance.

Sharp-eyed critics will note that the decline in smoking occurred among Needham's high school students, most of whom were unable to buy tobacco legally even before the minimum age for legal sales was raised. People aged 18 to 21, however, are only one target of a policy to restrict tobacco sales to young people. Another target is children who can obtain tobacco only by breaking the law — and their suppliers are often friends or siblings who are a few years older. In Needham and elsewhere, a minimum age of 21 for tobacco sales crimps the supply for all young people.

Restricting young people's access to tobacco is a key part of a strategy to reduce the staggering costs of smoking. According to a 2014 Surgeon General's report, nearly nine out of 10 adult smokers started before they were 18. A 2005 study in California found that 82 percent of adolescent smokers obtained their cigarettes from others, mostly friends — 41 percent of whom were of legal age to buy tobacco, and three-quarters of those were from 18 to 20 years of age.

The tobacco industry is well aware that its future depends on young smokers. "If a man has never smoked by age 18," an RJ Reynolds researcher said in 1982, "the odds are three to one he never will. By age 24, the odds are 20 to one." The Surgeon General reported in 2012 that of every three young smokers, only one will ever succeed in quitting — and of the other two, one will die of tobacco-related causes.

Last year, the Institutes of Medicine studied the potential effects of a nationwide ban on tobacco sales to people below the age of 21. The study predicted a 12 percent decline in the percentage of smokers and a 10 percent reduction in smoking-related deaths. Such significant declines would be welcome at a time when progress to reduce smoking and its effects on public health appear to have stalled.

Some will argue that 18- to 21-year-olds are old enough to vote and join the armed forces, and should be presumed mature enough to make decisions about their own behavior. That argument carried the day when states across the country cut the drinking age to 18 after ratification of the 26th Amendment in 1971, which lowered the voting age to 18 from 21.

But by 1988, all states had restored a 21-year-old minimum for alcohol sales. Binge drinking among high school seniors fell by 22 percent between 1982 and 1988, and the number of intoxicated young drivers involved in fatal accidents fell by nearly two-thirds. In Oregon and other states that have legalized marijuana for recreational use, the minimum legal age to purchase or possess the drug is 21. The same public-health rationale that applies to alcohol and pot should apply to the more highly addictive substance of tobacco.

Presuming the county staff returns with a sensible ordinance, the Board of Commissioners should approve it. Lane County shouldn't worry about becoming an island of sound tobacco policy. And the county wouldn't remain an island long if the county's leadership encourages other jurisdictions, including the state, to follow.

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