

Guest Commentary: Federal Glover: Proposition 29 could help curb tobacco use

By Federal Glover For the Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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I chose not to smoke. Didn't like it. I also didn't know the effects of second-hand smoke.

Later in life, I enjoyed a good cigar in those quiet evenings on my front porch. I don't know what the attraction was, but that phase quickly faded.

There has been a great deal in the news lately about tobacco and the role of tobacco prevention and research.

As I write this, the fate of Proposition 29 is still too close to call.

Last month, the County Board of Supervisors voted to support Proposition 29, which would have increased taxes on cigarettes by \$1 per pack. While we have done good work in tobacco prevention in the state, 32 states in the nation have higher tobacco taxes than California.

The U.S. Surgeon General's last report on "Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults" makes several recommendations for tobacco prevention efforts, including increasing taxes on tobacco. Increasing the price of these tobacco products is directly related to decreasing smoking rates, particularly among young people and low-income communities.

The tobacco industry heavily targets youth, communities of color and low-income communities through advertising and promotions, spending more than a million dollars per hour in this country alone. Tobacco prevention dollars don't come anywhere near to what the tobacco industry spends; however, there are policies that our county and cities can adopt that contribute to preventing tobacco use by youth and decreasing smoking rates.

Contra Costa has a long history of these tobacco prevention policy efforts. When I served as the Pittsburg mayor, the city and many other cities in the County supported the Tobacco Free Youth Ordinance, which provided momentum for the state ban on self-service displays of tobacco products in retail stores.

Research has shown that this ban, which simply requires clerk assistance to purchase tobacco, helps to keep tobacco out of the hands of young people. Other tobacco control laws, including secondhand smoke protections, also contribute to reducing youth smoking and creating healthier environments for every member of our families.

Our county has been in the vanguard for limiting smoking in public places. Since the 1980s, the county has been adopting and implementing strong tobacco-control laws, which have contributed to reducing smoking rates among youth and young adults.

More recently, these include the Secondhand Smoke Protections Ordinance and the Tobacco Retailer Licensing Law, both of which have served as models for the cities in the county and across the state to reduce tobacco influences in the community.

The Secondhand Smoke Protections Ordinance was adopted by the County in 2006, shortly after the Surgeon General stated that there is NO safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke, and the California Air Resources Board declared it to be a toxic air contaminant. This ordinance creates smoke-free areas within 20 feet of doors and windows of all buildings open to the public; in outdoor dining areas; in service areas such as bus stops and lines; and in parks. It also helps protect residents of multi-unit housing from drifting secondhand smoke by prohibiting smoking near doors and windows of multiunit housing; shared indoor and outdoor areas; and on balconies, decks and patios.

In an effort to further protect residents, 100 percent of all new multi-unit housing in the unincorporated county is also required to be smoke-free.

The cities of Martinez, Richmond, Pinole and Pleasant Hill have adopted comprehensive secondhand smoke ordinances similar to what the County has adopted.

The Tobacco Retailer Licensing Law requires any merchant who sells tobacco products to have a County License and to obey all tobacco laws in order to continue selling tobacco products. Retailers can have their license suspended if laws such as the "no sales to minors" law are not followed.

As a result of the law, illegal sales of cigarettes to underage youth in the unincorporated county dropped from 37 percent to only 9 percent after this law was adopted and implemented in 2004. Its impact has been so effective, the county's Tobacco Prevention Project is recommending that the county's cities adopt it.

The Tobacco Prevention Project in the Public Health Department coordinates compliance efforts for both of these laws. Staff also respond to complaints from those experiencing problems with drifting smoke in multiunit housing and provide information and education to these residents.

Our Tobacco Prevention Project staff also provides assistance to the cities on developing and implementing tobacco prevention policies that can help reduce youth smoking and create smoke-free places where residents live, work and play.

Project staff can be reached at 925-313-6214 or through Contra Costa Health Services' website at cchealth.org.

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