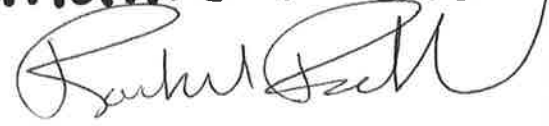


From the desk of Representative Rachel Prusak



## Our Opinion: Lawmakers should pass tobacco tax increase, add vaping to tax

The Portland Tribune Tuesday, June 18, 2019

**The social value of such a tax is simple: The more expensive a product is, the less likely young people, especially teenagers, will be to buy it.**

The 2019 Legislature is on a glide path toward the end of session, and one bill we thought had gone up in, well, smoke, got its second wind.

A boost in tobacco taxes — one of Gov. Kate Brown's priorities — was voted out of the House Revenue Committee last week and was up for a hearing on Monday (results were not available as of press time). It could get fast-tracked this week.

We hope it does.

There are several reasons to like this iteration of the bill.

First, it would tax vaping products — those smokeless tobacco products that have become ubiquitous, especially in our high schools (see Reporter Courtney Vaughn's excellent article, "Teen vaping: up in smoke," online). Cigarettes have long been the nation's leading preventable cause of death, but now there's a hot new contender for that odious honor. Vaping delivers the same addictive substance — nicotine — but in enticing, sweet flavors, and wrapped in devices so insidious they can be disguised as flash drives and powered up on students' computers.

House Bill 2270 would tax these devices and, equally important, would not constrain cities and counties from taxing them as well.

Good.

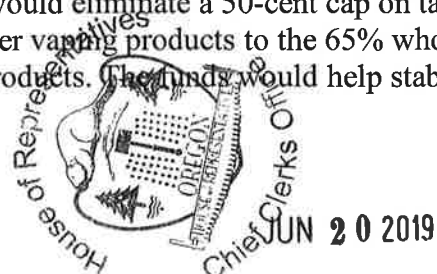
The social value of such a tax is simple: The more expensive a product is, the less likely young people, especially teenagers, will be to buy it. An oft-cited study shows that a 10% increase in the price of cigarettes resulted in an 8% decrease in the use of cigarettes, with the reduction greatest for the youngest smokers.

Almost nobody gets hooked on tobacco in their 30s. Stop them from smoking as teens, and an entire generation can be saved.

HB 2270 also would raise Oregon's tobacco taxes to put them in line with California and Washington. Parity is good tax policy and good public health policy.

Another reason to like the bill: lawmakers have said a portion of the money raised would be earmarked for mental health care, a proper priority of lawmakers this session.

The basics of the bill, according to our news partner, Oregon Public Broadcasting: HB 2270 would raise cigarette taxes \$1.33 to \$3.33 per pack. It would eliminate a 50-cent cap on taxes for premium cigars; and would subject e-cigarettes and other vaping products to the 65% wholesale tax currently imposed on other non-cigarette tobacco products. The funds would help stabilize the Oregon Health Plan.



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If approved, it would have to go to voters on the November 2020 ballot. That's not the ideal way to make public health policy, but it might be the only way to secure the necessary votes to get the bill out of both chambers. Last time a tobacco tax increase faced voters, in 2007, Big Tobacco pumped \$12 million into the state to barely defeat it. That fight likely will happen again. We'd prefer a straight vote by the lawmakers and the governor signing it into law, but politics is, and always has been, the art of the possible.

It's fourth down and goal-to-go for the 2019 Legislature. Before the final whistle blows, lawmakers ought to approve HB 2270.