

Opinion: Protect Detroit kids, not tobacco industry profits

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By Detroit Councilman Scott Benson
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Youth tobacco use and tobacco availability continue to cause significant problems for Detroit and our surrounding communities, with out-of-control retailers selling tobacco and other illicit products to kids. Minimal oversight and accountability are contributing to this.

According to researchers who study how tobacco retailer density affects tobacco use and disease, Detroit is considered a “tobacco swamp.” Eighty-five percent of Detroiters live within a half of a mile of a tobacco retailer. And in 2020, the city had over 1,000 tobacco retailers, 40 times more retailers than McDonald's and 90 times more than Starbucks.

This is a problem because most tobacco is purchased from neighborhood stores where the tobacco industry spends millions on advertising and marketing. Last year, the tobacco industry spent more than \$300 million marketing its deadly products in Michigan.

Supporters of the tobacco industry have said restrictions would have a negative impact on public health and local communities. This couldn't be further from the truth. We the people of Detroit know what is best for our community and state.

Earlier this month, I worked with the Detroit Police Department, the Building Safety Engineering and Environmental Department, and the community, to shut down a tobacco retailer that was illegally selling marijuana to teenagers. The only way we knew about this flagrant violation was because a teenager's grandmother got involved. We are so grateful for her care, but it shouldn't be up to the grandmothers of Detroit to enforce our tobacco prevention policies. We need better tools to regulate retailers and end illegal sales.

Last year, the Detroit City Council tried to advance a city policy to strengthen our local tobacco regulations and protect our youth, but we couldn't move forward because state law prevents us from doing so. Eventually, we passed a resolution urging the Legislature to restore local control and end the sale of flavored tobacco.

There is currently a bill package pending in Lansing that would restore local control, end the sale of flavored tobacco products, require tobacco retailers to have a license, repeal obsolete penalties on youth, and focus penalties where they belong — on the owners making profits from these products. I wholeheartedly support this legislation and urge the Legislature to act now and pass Senate Bills 647-654.

The bills are a win for all Michigan communities, especially those with more people of color and low-income individuals, as these are the groups who continue to face higher rates of tobacco use disease and death. The tobacco industry — and their paid spokespeople and front groups — see our kids and communities as expendable. And they will continue to prey upon real fears and real trauma to secure their future profits and prevent meaningful change.

Let's stand united and push forward on overdue changes to protect our kids, not tobacco industry profits.

Scott Benson is a member of the Detroit City Council representing District 3.

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