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CommonWealth
— BEACON —



Eight Massachusetts communities crack down on youth tobacco use

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By **BHAAMATI BORKHETARIA**

Cities and towns are cracking down on youth tobacco use with five new communities adopting nicotine-free generation policies and four putting restrictions on nicotine pouches – a popular product among younger people and the fastest-growing segment of the US tobacco market – in just the past three months.

After the Supreme Judicial Court greenlit a Brookline generational ban on tobacco in March 2024, 13 communities have followed suit with their own policies to prohibit the sale of tobacco to anyone born after a certain date. The latest to enact such rules are Needham, Chelsea, Belchertown, Newton, and Pelham.

Simultaneously, local boards of health are [limiting access to nicotine pouches](#) by restricting them to adult-only stores or capping the amount of nicotine in the product. Northampton, Townsend, and Montague all recently restricted the sale of nicotine pouches to adult-only stores.

Athol's board of health voted last week to limit the amount of nicotine in pouches to 6 milligrams. Other towns like Amherst and Ludlow are considering similar policies this month.

This push is part of an effort to protect younger people from nicotine and is happening at the local level with the support of groups like the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards and Massachusetts Health Officers Association. Their goal is to eventually reach a critical mass of communities that have nicotine-free generation policies across the state and to push the Legislature to pass a statewide policy.

"We're still in the early stages but we're seeing a lot of interest," said Maureen Buzby, a tobacco control coordinator who has worked with six of the communities in Massachusetts that have passed nicotine-free generation policies. "We've denormalized public smoking, and that's the goal of this nicotine-free generation policy – to denormalize the use of tobacco and nicotine products so that it becomes an oddity if somebody is doing it."

Sen. Jason Lewis and Rep. Tommy Vitolo both filed [bills](#) in January that would ban the sale of tobacco products to those born on or after January 1, 2006.

"There's a long history in our state of these kinds of efforts to help prevent smoking and tobacco use originating at the town or city level led by the local board of health, and then we look to expand it statewide," said Lewis, who represents six municipalities that have all adopted nicotine-free generation policies. "That's exactly what's happening here."

Retail associations are fighting the anti-tobacco policies, arguing that they unfairly limit revenue for gas stations and convenience stores while also taking away consumer choice.

Peter Brennan, executive director of the New England Convenience Store & Energy Marketers Association, criticized the local boards of health for passing these policies, saying there was little public scrutiny of the measures. He has called the policies a form of prohibition and said that convenience stores could lose up to 20 percent of their revenue.

"The proponents of nicotine-free generation will tell you that, well, it's phased in and it's not going to impact retailers for a long time," said Brennan. "But realistically, if you're an independent store owner and you're in a town that passes this nicotine-free generation, then your business just got instantly devalued by whatever your in-store nicotine revenue is."

Brennan said that nicotine users need only to go a town over to get their nicotine products. He said that stores lose not only the revenue on nicotine products but also on other products like grocery items that a customer might have purchased alongside the nicotine.

"If you start restricting them, you're going to A, create an illicit market and B, you're going to unnecessarily just disenfranchise retailers who are trying to sell legal products, and you're also taking away choice at the point of sale for somebody that might be a cigarette smoker who can no longer go into one of our stores and see another option," said Brennan.

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Lewis pushed back on Brennan's claims that retailers would suffer.

"We've taken action many times and passed many laws to address tobacco use, and we've heard that argument every single time," said Lewis. "Convenience stores are still here, and we still have them in all of our cities and towns and they seem to still be doing fine."

Last month, the US Food and Drug Administration formally [authorized](#) the popular "ZYN" nicotine pouches for sale, saying that the products have a lower risk of cancer and other serious health conditions when compared with other tobacco products. The agency also found that the use of pouches "remains low" among youth, citing the 2024 National Youth Tobacco Survey which showed that 1.8 percent of US middle and high school students reported using the products.

The Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, a national nonprofit, [interpreted](#) the data differently – citing that youth use of nicotine pouches has more than doubled between 2021 and 2024.

Opponents of the policies restricting nicotine have formed an opposition group, Citizens for Adult Choice, which organizes against local nicotine restrictions and the new statewide bills. The group, which receives funding from Brennan's organization, kicked its campaign off with a rally on January 22 and has been providing information to its members on board of health hearings in different municipalities where these nicotine restrictions are being discussed.

Lewis acknowledged that the nicotine-free generation bill would face an uphill battle.

"I'm under no illusions that this will be easy or it will happen overnight," said Lewis. "Every single prior fight to address tobacco use and to implement new policies to reduce the use of tobacco and to help prevent predatory marketing of these products to our teenagers was a fight. We faced it before every time we've made our case for saving lives and for reducing health care costs, which is a burden we all bear."

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The Codcast



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- **TRANSPORTATION** : Boston Mayor Michelle Wu [announced](#) she is eliminating a bus lane that runs along part of Boylston Street and is undertaking a review of the city's bus and bike lanes. The move comes after her challenger in this year's mayoral election, Josh Kraft, criticized bike lanes. (Boston Business Journal)
- **MEDIA** : New England Public Media, which has been losing money since 2020, [laid off](#) 13 percent of its workforce. (WBUR)
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