

SB 2281
House Finance and Taxation Committee
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Chair Headland and members of the committee, my name is Katie Fitzsimmons and I am a proud board member of Tobacco Free North Dakota. For my day job, I work in substance misuse prevention in higher education and serve on the Drug Free Communities Committee through Burleigh-Morton Behavioral Health Coalition. Most importantly, I am the mother of three children that I desperately want to protect from the dangers of every form of tobacco and nicotine. I care a whole lot about our youth making the best decisions they can in regard their health and wellness not only because I see the benefits, but I wish I had done the same. I'm glad I haven't smoked in over 13 years, but I wish I didn't have to tick the "former smoker" box at the doctor's office.

No one wants to see taxes increase and certainly even fewer legislators will want to vote for such a thing. However, in this case, this is one area where North Dakota needs to keep up with the Joneses. The average per-pack tobacco tax in the United States rings in at \$1.97 and ours is embarrassingly and comically low at only \$.44. Further embarrassing, we only classified e-cigarettes as tobacco products last session, yet we still do not tax those products accordingly.

I am aware of the committee's vote on HB 1570 last month and how the House followed suit and rejected that proposal. Though SB 2281 does not meet the standard for best practices when it comes to tax legislation, it shows that it is a true compromise. You will have the ability to do your due diligence and place taxes on nicotine pouches and e-cigarettes, as they are tobacco products that have survived the loophole for too long while compromising on a much smaller tax increase on combustibles. This bill is progress; not perfection. But progress of any kind is so very important.

The most important aspect to raising the tobacco tax is that doing so will absolutely result in less youth using these harmful and highly addictive products. In my work, I have watched, with great celebration, youth smoking rates decrease as education, awareness, and enforcement increased. **Yet vapes and pouches are soaring in popularity and accessibility, all under the ruse that those products are less harmful; a message reinforced by the lack of parity with other tobacco products. It's time to send a clear message to youth and all users of these products: these things are as harmful and addictive as other forms of tobacco (even more so!) and simply not worth your time and treasure. Raising the tax will keep these products out of reach for some of our most vulnerable youth.**

This bill will reduce our state's costs, improve the health and vitality of so many citizens, and it will assuredly save lives. I strongly urge you to promote health and wellness in our state with a Do Pass recommendation and a green light on the floor. I thank each of you for your service to the state and your consideration on this important issue.