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(APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE CO-CHAIR OF THE
CONSERVATION SUB COMMITTEE)
EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Public Health Committee

Public Hearing – February 8, 2021

SB 326 AA Prohibiting The Sale Of Flavored Cigarettes, Tobacco Products, Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems and Vapor Products

Testimony of Bobby Gibson, State Representative for the 15th House District of Connecticut, Vice Chair of the General Law Committee, House Chair of the Appropriations Conservation and Development Subcommittee, and Education Committee.

Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and members of the committee:

I thank you for this opportunity to share with you my wholehearted support of a ban on the sale of all flavored tobacco products in our state.

As an educator and a coach of hundreds of youth in Bloomfield and Windsor, I know how easily kids can be pressured into bad choices, especially if we allow the tobacco industry to work its marketing magic on them through enticing flavors, social media and TikTok, and down at the neighborhood store.

Let me be clear: Parents, educators, and community leaders must continue to give our children the lessons they need to grow up into resilient and disciplined young adults who strive to succeed with dignity, integrity, and delight, despite adversity. Let's get flavored-tobacco out of their way right now! These items – menthol cigarettes, mango and candy flavored vapes – are EVERYWHERE. We know that the tobacco industry came up with these products because they knew kids would want to try them, and once they're hooked, they're customers for life. Not much more than 20 years ago a former tobacco industry executive said, and I quote "Cherry Skoal is for someone who likes the taste of candy, if you know what I'm saying". He said that in the Wall Street Journal. Now the industry may be smart enough to not say that any more, but they are still doing it, and getting craftier about it every day. Right now our kids' are paying the price, but once they're hooked, we all pay the price.

And then there's the way the tobacco industry has systematically worked to target and enslave communities of color into addiction with menthol cigarettes. They gave free products away to kids in iconic neighborhoods of color, they stole our cultural heritage and then plastered our communities with ads that tried, and in some ways succeeded, to make us feel relevant, they saturate our communities with way more tobacco stores than in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods and they make these products – these menthol cigarettes that are easier to get hooked on and harder to quit than regular cigarettes – they made these products cheaper in communities of color.

And I also know that people – some honest with good intentions and some who are maybe just concerned about money – are worried about the adults who are already addicted to these products, and have been for most of their lives. To them I say 2 things – 1) we can't keep hooking kids on these products just because you got addicted to these 40 or 50 years ago when you were a teenager... we can't sacrifice our future to feed the addictions of our past. We just can't. And 2) this law will not make it illegal for you to buy, use, or possess this product. So, if you can't switch to unflavored, or if you can't quit, and you need to get your menthols from someplace outside of Connecticut, you won't be breaking the law, period. But you won't be able to get them at your corner market... and neither will the kids. And THAT'S the whole point, and why I support this bill.

We need to step up and pass this legislation now. If it was the right thing to do for kids in Massachusetts, and California, and over 100 towns across the nation so far, then it's the right thing to do here in Connecticut. Part of that is that we need to keep moving toward aligning with our neighboring states on policies like these too. This fits right into this, and I hope that Governor Lamont sees that too.

By enacting SB 326 into law in Connecticut this year, we'll be preventing tens of thousands of kids from getting hooked on nicotine through flavored products. As a result, we'll begin to eliminate billions of dollars in future health care costs that would otherwise await our children's generation as it moves into a future full of possibility.

As an educator and as someone committed to being a humble steward of our collective future, I'm convinced that we must not allow flavored tobacco products that can severely damage our lungs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic to continue to be sold. Make 2021 the year we say No! No to Big Tobacco in Connecticut. Bettering our health means also bettering the health of our communities, now and for years to come.