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Addressing Nuisance Tobacco Shops

The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to take a closer look at tobacco shops in unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County, and to assess their impact on the health and safety of the communities around them.

The [motion](#), authored by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, also called for examining potential regulations to address nuisance tobacco shops, as well as education and outreach strategies to curb tobacco use.

“Currently, smoke shops in LA County are allowed by-right in commercial zones and do not need a special business licenses,” he said. “There is no way to track or monitor them. We do not know how many there are, let alone how they operate. Not all of them may be problematic, and the crimes and concerns that affect certain communities may not touch others. Still, I would like to hear about the best practices and regulatory options we have, including possible changes to tobacco retailer licensing and land use regulations.”

A 2017 [study](#) by the University of California Riverside School of Medicine suggested tobacco shops “may constitute nuisance properties associated with dangerous neighborhood conditions for crime and violence.” Meanwhile, the nonprofit Community Coalition’s [2017 South LA People’s Poll](#) found 64 percent of adults and 44 percent of youth are “very concerned” with criminal activity at and surrounding smoke shops.

While California’s smoke-free laws prohibit smoking in most businesses, there are exemptions for businesses whose “main purpose” is the sale of tobacco products, as well as for private smokers’ lounges, defined as enclosed areas in or attached to a tobacco shop. There are concerns it can compound the problems of alcohol outlets and marijuana dispensaries.

“Our research states that tobacco shops are a potentially serious but unaddressed public health danger,” Prof. Andrew Subica, one of the primary authors of the UC Riverside study, told the Board. “We strongly support this motion to allocate public resources to identify and assess the scope of the tobacco shop problem.”

“Without reliable enforcement, the overconcentration of alcohol retail outlets in communities of color a generation ago can easily repeat itself with tobacco shops retailing cannabis,” warned Robert Baird, an urban planner at the nonprofit Prevention Institute. “In reality, this process appears to be well underway and with similar impacts for addiction, public safety and disinvestment.”

“For decades, Big Tobacco has focused on low-income neighborhoods and communities of color to market their deadly products,” added John Yi, advocacy director for the American Lung Association in California. “With the astronomical rise of e-cigarettes and flavored tobacco products, these community stores have become ground zero for the industries’ tactics towards addicting future generations of smokers.”

Community Coalition President and CEO Alberto Retana said, “This motion is a key step... to not only create an environment that respects the dignity and quality of life in South LA, but to ensure that the goods and services we deliver are those that speak to our highest aspirations.”

The Board directed the Departments of Public Health, Regional Planning, County Counsel, Sheriff, Treasurer and Tax Collector, and key community stakeholders, to report back on nuisance tobacco shops within 120 days.

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