October 18, 2021

The Honorable Adam Hinds, Chairman

The Honorable Mark Cusack, Chairman

Joint Committee on Revenue

State House Room 34
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Chairmen Hinds and Cusack:

Please record Tobacco Free Mass in strong support of increasing the cigarette and cigar taxes. Price increases on tobacco products are one of the most effective ways to protect young people from becoming addicted tobacco and nicotine.

We believe that tobacco products should be taxed at a rate that would discourage youth from accessing them. **S1809/H2870, An Act Protecting Youth from Nicotine Addiction**, addresses tobacco taxes comprehensively.  This legislation from Senator Chandler and Rep. Decker would increase the tax on cigarettes by $1.00 to $4.51 and increase the tax on cigars from 40% of wholesale to 80% of wholesale.

Taxing tobacco products is a proven strategy for reducing youth tobacco use. Massachusetts’ low youth cigarette smoking rate is due in part to its pattern of consistently raising cigarette taxes every few years.  We have not raised the cigarette tax since 2013.  It’s time.

Massachusetts has been eclipsed in tobacco taxes by other northeastern states. Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York have higher cigarette taxes than Massachusetts.  At $3.51, Massachusetts is falling behind in protecting its kids.  Cigars, currently taxed at 40% of wholesale, are still in kids’ price range. Cigars are sold in corner stores and other locations accessible to kids and are sold at low prices. Taxing these cheap cigars at the more appropriate rate of 80% of wholesale will help make them less attractive to young people.

There is free help for tobacco users trying to quit using tobacco as a result of the tax. The Legislature passed reforms in 2019 that provides easy access to FDA-approved tobacco cessation medicine and counseling through health insurance plans. In addition, the state’s quitline, run through the Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program at DPH, is available free to anyone wishing to quit using tobacco.

We believe that we have an obligation to fund additional outreach and help when we increase taxes on tobacco products. An appropriate use for the new tax revenue is to increase programs that will help people quit using tobacco products—or never start.  We support dedicating revenues from this tobacco tax to the Department of Public Health for its tobacco cessation and prevention program.

The statistics pointing to the benefits of protecting young people from tobacco are compelling. Over 90% of adult smokers started before they were eighteen years old. 80% of youth smokers will become adult smokers and one-half of adult smokers will die prematurely from tobacco-related diseases. Without prevention policies, 103,000 Massachusetts kids alive today will die from smoking. Tobacco and nicotine use costs Massachusetts more than $4 billion annually in healthcare costs.

We urge you to pass much-needed increases to the cigarette and cigar taxes. Tobacco taxes are a key strategy in the fight to make sure that young people in the Commonwealth grow up without the burden of tobacco and nicotine addiction.

Sincerely,

Dennis M. Dimitri, MD, Chair