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government  
Five Questions With: Dr. Tim McAfee

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*In response to a proposed legislation to roll back the state tax on cigarettes by \$1, Dr. Tim McAfee, director of the Office on Smoking and Health at the Centers for Disease Control, testified before the R.I. General Assembly against the proposal. McAfee's message was that high taxes on cigarettes were good for Rhode Islanders: it lowers tobacco use in youth and adults, it does not hurt convenience store sales, and it increases revenue for the state.*

*The proposed bill was returned to committee for more study. Providence Business News asked McAfee to explain the benefits of the high taxes on cigarettes from both a health and economic perspective.*

**PBN: Why is it a mistake for Rhode Island to cut taxes on cigarettes by \$1?**

**McAFEE:** It's not in my capacity to tell what Rhode Island to do. Rather, I can tell what the potential results of such an action will be.

My testimony is based on the work done in the last 10-15 years on the impacts of price on youth initiating tobacco use, adults quitting smoking, and the likelihood of ex-smokers relapsing.

Rhode Island has raised its taxes significantly on cigarettes. Each time it has done that, there has been a decrease in youth initiation and young adults quitting and an increase in revenue for the state.

The few experiments in the world where cigarette taxes have been rolled back, the results have been disturbing. In Canada, for instance, where they rolled back prices, there was an increase in youth smoking by 9 percent.

**PBN: Can you quantify the increased health costs if Rhode Island cut its tobacco taxes by \$1?**



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CDC

"IF TAXES ON cigarettes were cut by \$1 in Rhode Island, the costs estimated for kids are about \$1.8 million in increased health care costs over the next five years, associated with smoking-related pregnancy," said Dr. Tim McAfee, director of the Office on Smoking and Health at the Centers for Disease Control.

**McAFEE:** That's obviously our primary concern, from the CDC perspective. If taxes on cigarettes were cut by \$1 in Rhode Island, the costs estimated for kids are about \$1.8 million in increased health care costs over the next five years, associated with smoking-related pregnancy.

Smoking causes heart attacks and strokes, so the number would be much bigger if you look at all the health-associated costs. People will die. One out of three people who continue to smoke through their adult life will die prematurely from smoking-related diseases. Their lives will be 8-12 years shorter; and the chances of dying in middle age are remarkably higher.

**PBN: Is the proposed rollback of cigarette taxes part of a larger national movement? Is it being supported by the tobacco industry?**

**McAFEE:** At the CDC, we work closely with all 50 states, so we have a fairly good idea of what's happening. At the legislative level, only one other state actually tried to lower taxes this year, New Hampshire, and that was only 10 cents. There is nothing else the magnitude of Rhode Island's \$1 rollback.

We don't have an answer to the question of whether the tobacco industry is involved.

**PBN: Rhode Island has positioned itself as a leader in efforts to cut back on smoking. From the national perspective, do you agree?**

**McAFEE:** I totally agree. Rhode Island has done a number of things that has made it a leader around its approach to tobacco. By controlling the harms caused by tobacco by the increases in pricing, it's influenced other states in New England to take similar action. The results have been quite dramatic in lowering adult smoking rates and youth initiation rates. It is certainly one of the major public health achievements in the last decade. It is clearly one of the most powerful ways to keep young people from starting to smoke and encouraging adults to quit.

**PBN: A proposal to raise taxes on drinks containing sugar and high fructose corn syrup is also now before the R.I. General Assembly. Given the success of higher taxes in the effort to limit smoking, do you think a similar intervention will be effective in fighting the current plague of obesity?**

**McAFEE:** I'm not in a position to provide evidence or scientific support for or against that idea, even if there are some potential analogues with a tax on cigarettes. The thing that distinguishes the tobacco tax, there is a degree of certainty about the effects of raising taxes about specific long term effects, such as reductions in the incidence of lung cancer.

I am not an expert on sugar-sweetened beverages. It's up to legislators and community advocates to pursue that, and, to the extent that it's pursued, it needs to be carefully studied to see what the anticipated effects will be.

In a number of states, there has been opposition, not wanting to raise taxes on cigarettes, worried about the economic impact, that convenience stores will be impacted. A study just came out this month, done by the University of Illinois in Chicago, which looked at the experience over the last 12 years in terms of convenience stores and profitability. The study basically found that increased taxes on cigarettes did not negatively impact convenience stores.