

House GOP budget guts DeWine's anti-tobacco rules, cigarette tax hike

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Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio – In the latest bout of a yearslong clash on tobacco policy, House Republican lawmakers dumped tax increases and new enforcement mechanisms that Gov. Mike DeWine has long sought against the tobacco industry.

In state budget revisions unveiled Tuesday, House Republicans also slashed funding from the state's Tobacco Use Prevention, Cessation, and Enforcement fund, which operates Ohio's tobacco cessation hotline and enforces age requirements for vendors. The House budget provides \$12 million over two years, versus the \$20 million DeWine proposed. The state expects to spend about \$18.5 million in the two-year cycle ending June 30.

The state health department says the quit line is one of its strongest bulwarks against tobacco addiction, leaving people five times more likely to successfully quit smoking than people who quit cold turkey.

The proposed cuts, part of the ongoing process of drafting a two-year budget, come as tobacco remains the leading preventable cause of death in the nation and as vapes, e-cigarettes, and Zyns (nicotine pouches) increasingly capture a new generation of users.

DeWine, a Republican, proposed a state budget with tobacco – both old fashioned cigarettes and new-school handheld vapes – in the crosshairs. It called for:

- Increasing the sales tax on a pack of cigarettes from \$1.60 to \$3.10 per pack
- Doubling the tax per unit on liquid or nonliquid nicotine products like vapes or Zyns
- Creating a registration program for vape sellers, with penalties and the \$200 to \$400 in annual fees flowing to the Tobacco Use Prevention Fund
- Allowing the Department of Public Safety to enforce Ohio's 21-and-up and other tobacco laws

One in five high school students in Ohio reported e-cigarette use in high school in 2021, nearly twice the national rate, [according to state survey data](#). And while cigarette use in Ohio has decreased over the past 20 years, the rate of adults who use e-cigarettes [nearly doubled](#) between 2015 (4.6%) and 2021 (8.8%). As DeWine has emphasized, the costs of the problem reach beyond the user – Ohio’s Medicaid program spends billions treating residents with tobacco-related illnesses, the [world’s leading cause of preventable death](#).

House Finance Chairman Brian Stewart and House Speaker Matt Huffman unveiled the budget changes at a briefing with reporters Tuesday. Stewart briefly mentioned the cigarette taxes, noting the House stripped them along with other so called “sin tax” proposals on sports betting and recreational marijuana. He didn’t elaborate on the tobacco cessation or enforcement changes.

DeWine has a [decadeslong history](#), in both the U.S. Senate and state of Ohio, of fighting the tobacco industry. He’s widely credited with laying the legislative groundwork to give the U.S. Food and Drug Administration power to regulate the tobacco industry, which passed in 2009 after he left the chamber. And as governor, he convinced lawmakers in a previous budget cycle to raise the age required to buy tobacco from 18 to 21.

Since then, however, lawmakers have responded by passing legislation that blocks cities from adopting tobacco laws stricter than those of the state. It came after several cities passed prohibitions against flavored tobacco, seen by public health workers as especially alluring to children. A common pleas judge froze that law last year, and an [appellate court will soon rule on the state’s appeal](#).

The budget is still early in its life cycle. The House can make further changes, and it will need to mesh its ideas with those of the Senate to reach Gov. Mike DeWine, who can sign or veto it by line item.