



SAINT ALBANS
MESSENGER

Banning cigs makes us racists?

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“Every argument the tobacco industry puts up can be swatted down by asking whether the habit they propose will cost us more or less, whether the purpose is to add customers or to deny them, whether it makes it easier for our youth to experiment with it, or not, and whether the public’s health is helped, or hurt.

The tobacco industry is on the wrong side of each of those questions. This is about nothing other than making money at the expense of the public’s health, and that public includes African Americans.”

The tobacco industry is pouring money into Vermont, the objective being to counter legislation that would ban flavored nicotine and vaping products, and, specifically, the ban on menthol cigarettes and e-cigarette products. The industry’s campaign includes, for Vermonters, an usual twist: Industry lobbyists make the case that to ban menthol products is racist since the ban would “fall disproportionately — and unfairly — on African American adults.”

Please.

The quote comes from a R.J. Reynolds spokesman who evidently isn't aware that, according to the most recent census numbers, there are roughly 1,780 African American males who live in Vermont, or about three tenths of a percent. Available stats show that about 14 percent of African American men smoke [African American women smoke at a far lower percentage.]. So, the tobacco industry is pouring tens of thousands of dollars into Vermont on behalf of 250 African American men?

Hardly. The tobacco lobbyists are simply playing the race card, implying that anyone who supports the ban is purposely taking aim at African American men.

Not only is that deeply ignorant, a slightly deeper dive into the issue shows that if anyone is being racist, or taking aim at African American men, it's the tobacco industry.

The reason the tobacco industry opposes the ban on menthol is that African American men prefer menthol to any other flavor, much more so than any other ethnic group. Seven out of every 10 African American men who smoke, pick menthol cigarettes. Studies also show that the

menthol flavored cigarettes are more addictive than other flavors and the menthol makes it easier on the lungs.

The tobacco industry found a niche with African American men.

What the industry does not share is that African American men also die from smoking at a higher rate than other ethnic groups. Hence the tie in to menthol flavored products.

What is so deeply offensive about the tobacco industry's claims is that it pretends to be on the side of African Americans by defending their right to choose, as if it's a personal rights issue. It is no such thing. The tobacco industry also neglects to mention that it specifically targets African Americans in its marketing, and it makes sure the price points are low enough to encourage increased use. The industry is sophisticated enough to price its menthol products according to neighborhoods and according to the density of African Americans who live in each. In these neighborhoods the tobacco companies give menthol products a disproportionate amount of shelf space in the stores that serve them. Guess why.

This isn't because the tobacco companies love African Americans, it's because the tobacco companies created a market and want to protect it, and the industry is indifferent to the harm their products inflict on their African American customers.

It's also fatuous for the industry to argue that banning the menthol products will create a "dangerous illicit market" insinuating that the public's health is better off allowing people to smoke at will rather than banning the products. This is nothing like the prohibition issue with alcohol, which was a blanket prohibition. Tobacco products are still available, it's the flavored products, vaping, e-cigarettes, and menthol cigarettes, that are being singled out for the very simple and defensible reason that we're trying to curb the appeal of smoking to our youth.

Tobacco use is still the number one preventable cause of death in Vermont. We lose about 1,000 people each year to smoking, which comes with a health care price tag of an estimated \$348 million each year.

Every argument the tobacco industry puts up can be swatted down by asking whether the habit they propose will cost us more or less, whether the purpose is to add customers or to deny them, whether it makes it easier for our youth to experiment with it, or not, and whether the public's health is helped, or hurt.

The tobacco industry is on the wrong side of each of those questions. This is about nothing other than making money at the expense of the public's health, and that public includes African Americans.

Our legislators, and our governor, need to stay the course and ban the products.

By Emerson Lynn