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## Disgusted by Smoking, Outraged by a Plan to Ban Tobacco

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE NOV. 17, 2014

WESTMINSTER, Mass. — The fury — and make no mistake, it is white-hot fury — went way beyond the ordinary wrath of offended citizenry. A plan here to ban the sale of tobacco has ignited a call to arms.

The outrage is aimed at a proposal by the local Board of Health that could make Westminster the first town in the country where no one could buy cigarettes, e-cigarettes, cigars and chewing tobacco.

The uproar stems not from a desire by people here to smoke — only 17 percent do (a smidge higher than the statewide average). Many say they have never touched tobacco and find the habit disgusting. Rather, they perceive the ban as a frontal assault on their individual liberties. And they say it would cripple the eight retailers in town who sell tobacco products.

The ban is the major topic at Vincent's Country Store, where a petition against it sits on the front counter and attracts more signatures every day; at last count, 1,200 people had signed, in a town of 7,400.

As shoppers come and go, they feed one another's fury.

“They’re just taking away everyday freedoms, little by little,” said Nate Johnson, 32, an egg farmer who also works in an auto body shop, as he stood outside the store last week. “This isn’t about tobacco, it’s about control,” he said.

“It’s un-American,” put in Rick Sparrow, 48, a house painter.

As Wayne and Deborah Hancock grabbed a shopping cart, they joined in. All quickly agreed that the next freedoms at risk would be guns and religion, prompting Mrs. Hancock, 52, a homemaker, to say that she was afraid to wear her cross.

“I’m thinking, ‘Am I going to be beheaded?’ ” she said, not entirely joking.

Nearly 500 people packed a hearing at a local elementary school on Wednesday night held by the three members of the Board of Health. Passions ran high, and the hearing became so unruly that the board chairwoman could not maintain order; she shut down the hearing 20 minutes after it began.

The crowd started singing “God Bless America” in protest as the board members left under police protection. Angry residents circulated petitions demanding a recall election for the board members.

Few can fathom how Westminster became the latest setting for the nation’s decades-old tobacco wars. The pre-Revolutionary settlement emerged as a stagecoach stop in the late 1700s between Boston and points west. It remains largely rural and votes heavily Republican. There is no industry here, not even a mall.

Opponents of the ban blame “outside groups” that want to

make the town a test case, conjecturing that because it is so small, no one would care.

In fact, the Board of Health has been discussing the ban since the spring. But no one noticed until the board notified merchants last month that they could lose their permits to sell tobacco. David B. Sutton, a spokesman for Altria, the parent company of Philip Morris, the nation's biggest tobacco company, said the company was monitoring the situation but had not been involved or stoked the rebellion.

Tobacco accounts for only a fraction of total revenue at the stores here that sell it. But people who buy cigarettes and cigars also buy other things, and studies say that losing those customers can cost stores a third of their revenue.

“The name of the game is one-stop shopping,” said Joe Serio, the owner and pharmacist at the brown-shingled Westminster Pharmacy, where tobacco sales are 2 percent of revenues, and where wine and beer are stocked next to the cramped aisles of Band-Aids and antacids.

Over the years, Massachusetts has banned smoking in workplaces, as well as in restaurants and bars. And most of the state's 351 cities and towns have enacted their own restrictions. For example, 105 towns have banned tobacco sales in health care institutions, including pharmacies; 34 have raised the legal age for buying cigarettes to 21 from 18; eight have banned the sale of flavored tobacco products and e-cigarettes.

But Westminster would be the first in the state and nation with a full-blown ban on selling all tobacco and [nicotine](#) products. The idea originated with the Board of Health, which says it has a moral obligation to try to stop young people from smoking. The board found it hard to keep up

with all the new products, like bubblegum-flavored cigars and strawberry-margarita-flavored tobacco, many of them aimed at hooking young people.

“We have a whack-a-mole-effect,” Joan Hamlett, the town’s tobacco control agent, said at the hearing Wednesday night before it was cut short. “Every 18 months since 1994, this Westminster Board of Health has been looking at different regulations because every time we work together to find a way to reduce youth access to tobacco, the tobacco industry comes out with a new product that we have to look at and address and figure out how to regulate.”

Andrea Crete, chairwoman of the Board of Health, quoting a report from the surgeon general, said that youth who shop at least twice a week in stores that sell tobacco are 64 percent more likely to start smoking than those who do not.

“The Board of Health permitting these establishments to sell these dangerous products that, when used as directed, kill 50 percent of its users, ethically goes against our public health mission,” Ms. Crete said.

The crowd listened, but once the hearing was opened for public comment, people began to hoot and holler.

“You people make me sick,” one man growled at the board as the audience cheered.

Wayne R. Walker, a town selectman, said that the selectmen had voted unanimously to oppose the ban. “I detest smoking and tobacco in all its forms,” he told the health board, but such a “unilateral and radical approach” as banning all sales would “create a significant economic hardship.”

A resident named Kevin West said that smoking was “one of

the most disgusting habits anybody could possibly do,” but added: “I find this proposal to be even more of a disgusting thing.” The shouts after his statement prompted Ms. Crete, who had issued several warnings, to declare the hearing over.

She said that people could submit their views in writing until Dec. 1. The board, which has final say on the ban, will schedule another meeting and vote on the proposal, but she did not know when.

As angry citizens milled about after the aborted hearing, Brian Vincent, who owns Vincent’s Country Store, said he was disappointed he did not have a chance to tell the board that none of the merchants in town sells the kind of cheap, sweet tobacco products that the board is worried about. And none has been found in the last two years with underage sales violations.

Among the hundreds of protesters at the hearing, at least two people — doctors — supported the ban. Dr. Corey Saltin and Dr. Payam Aghassi, lung specialists who have a private practice nearby, said that they understood concerns about free choice but that people who are subjected to secondhand smoke have rights, too.

“This ban is going to happen somewhere, sometime,” Dr. Saltin predicted. “But probably not in Westminster.”

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/us/disgusted-by-smoking-outraged-by-a-plan-to-ban-tobacco.html?partner=msft\\_msn&r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/us/disgusted-by-smoking-outraged-by-a-plan-to-ban-tobacco.html?partner=msft_msn&r=0)