



Published May 25th, 2022

Hookah proponents fail at last ditch attempt to get exemption from flavored tobacco ban

By Sora O'Doherty

Although it is unusual for there to be much discussion about city ordinances when they come back to the council for second reading, the Orinda ordinance banning the sale of flavored tobacco products was the exception, and was pulled from the consent calendar on May 17 to allow for further public comments. The comments were divided into two camps: proponents of the continued use of flavored tobacco products in hookahs, and opponents of any use of flavored tobacco at all. City council members were not swayed, and proceeded to adopt the ordinance banning all sale of flavored tobacco in Orinda without change. The new ordinance will become effective on June 16, 30 days after adoption.

The discussion included a face-off between Thomas Lawton, government affairs representative of Fumari, Inc., a hookah manufacturer, and Mayra Lopez, Contra Costa County Health Services program manager of the Tobacco Prevention Project. Lawton, in both written and oral comments, accused the county of misleading the city by providing false information in order to fit the county's political agenda.

In response, Lopez submitted a red-lined version of the county's earlier letter of support for the proposed ban on flavored tobacco products. Although there were some differences, Lopez continued to assert that there is rising hookah use among youths and that any tobacco use is dangerous and deleterious to health. That position was strongly supported by Jen Grand-Lejano of the American Cancer Society and a Contra Costa County resident. She specializes in local tobacco control, she said, because tobacco is a unique product that "when used, kills half its users."

Jimmy Ancira submitted both written and oral comments addressing the issue of whether members of the LGBTQ community are more susceptible to hookah use. Ancira said that hookah use is a gateway to other tobacco products, and told of how this occurred in his own life. "As a Latin gay male," he said, "I have witnessed firsthand how flavored hookah hooks vulnerable youth and leads them to use other types of tobacco products."

The issue of hookah use in the LGBTQ community was addressed on the other side by George Johnson, a manufacturer of wooden hookah pipes, who identified as a gay man. Johnson countered the argument that had been made that flavored tobacco products began in the 1990s, but rather, he said, the use goes back some 400 years. Tobacco for hookah use has always been flavored. He also alleged that hookah use in California is on the decline.

Alexandra Winston told the city council how in 2017 her son started vaping, and in 2019 her husband tried vaping as a route to quit smoking. Her husband died, leaving her a single parent of four. Her son continues to vape. She argued that what was before the council was a question of health equity. "No business should profit off people's lives," she concluded.

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA