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## No smoking: Teen smoking rates drop. Time for legislation to help more quit.

Smoking is losing its status among the cool crowd. According to researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the number of high school students who smoke fell from 20.3 percent to 19 percent in 2007.

That's a significant drop. But not nearly good enough.

Imagine if one out of every five high school students in the state was diagnosed with cancer. Parents and legislators alike would be vigilant to find a cure as quickly as possible.

Smoking can be every bit as life-threatening as any disease (it causes plenty of them). In the U.S., it kills nearly 450,000 people each year. That's the equivalent of a city bigger than Raleigh. If terrorists bombed a city that size, killing every resident, we would unleash the terrifying force of the U.S. military on them.

Yet when it comes to smoking, we won't even enact laws to protect the innocent from the deadly consequences of second-hand smoke.

You can't legislate human behavior, the argumentative maintain.

Oh yes, you can.

We have seat belt laws. Speeding laws. Drunk-driving laws. We have laws against abusing children.

Subjecting minors, or anyone else for that matter, to second-hand smoke is abusive, a health hazard that creates a wide array of problems.

Government has, in a way, become a co-conspirator with the tobacco companies. Since 1998, when a settlement was reached, the states have received \$203.5 billion in tobacco-generated revenues — \$79.2 billion from the settlement and an additional \$124.3 billion in taxes from tobacco sales. The more cigarettes that companies like Philip Morris sell, the more money the states take in.

A substantial portion of that money was intended to be used to curb smoking and to care for those already ailing from smoking-related diseases. But so far only a measly \$6.5 billion, or 3.2 percent, of the funds have been used to prevent smoking. There is a fear, in some levels of government, that if smokers stop altogether, it might mean the loss of a steady source of state revenue. We've agreed to turn a blind eye to smokers, for a nominal fee.

Thankfully, teenagers still have that knack for spotting hypocrisy in adults. They're on to us.

They get that nicotine is an addiction that they can live better and longer without.

Now if only our legislators would act as wisely.

Senate Majority Leader Tony Rand of Fayetteville has made a push to allow local communities to enact their own public smoking bans. Rand's proposal hasn't won supported from his fellow legislators, but we urge him to continue. We also hope our legislative delegation will push for an increased cigarette tax, the proceeds going to prevention and cessation programs.

For the sake of our kids and their compromised health.

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