



Preserving Hookah Culture & Protecting Hookah Tradition across the USA

Neighborhood Planning and Development Committee
Kansas City, MO City Council

Testimony of Christopher Hudgins
President, National Hookah Community Association

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Chairperson Ryana Parks-Shaw and member of the committee, I currently serve as the President of the National Hookah Community Association (NHCA).

The NHCA brings together, and serves as the voice of, hookah producers, distributors, sellers, hookah lounge owners, consumers, and community members who support the preservation of hookah's cultural traditions. We are writing to request that as you consider Ordinance 240897, which bans flavored tobacco products, you acknowledge the cultural significance of hookah to minority and immigrant populations as well as the lack of youth access to, and use of, the product. California took a historic step in December 2022 by enacting a statewide ban on flavored tobacco products, which exempted hookah, for these reasons. NHCA worked with California, and with many other state and local governments including Colorado, Columbus, Denver, San Diego, San Jose, Los Angeles, and others, to include exemptions for hookah in recent flavor ban legislation.

Hookah is a small category in the tobacco space, making up only roughly 0.005% of nicotine product sales. However, hookah is an important cultural practice to many and one that has existed for centuries, originating in the Middle East and India. Today, a broad cross-section of immigrants in the U.S. from around the world enjoy hookah at home and in lounges as a centerpiece for cultural, business, and social gatherings. Hookah is widely used by Middle Eastern, Armenian, Turkish, East African, Indian, Persian, Indonesian, and other minority immigrant citizens. Hookah lounges across the country have come to serve as safe gathering places for many diverse ethnic and religious communities. Despite the importance of this social practice and tradition, NHCA members continue to find that many policymakers are often unfamiliar with hookah, its practice, and its community.

NHCA fully supports efforts to eliminate youth access and usage of tobacco products, including hookah. Hookah is unlikely to be used or consumed by youth for many reasons. Annual research released just last week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration showed that hookah use by middle and high schools dropped nearly 35% and is



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at a low of just 0.7% of middle and high school students. This is eight times less than the number of teens who vape. Additionally, hookah water pipes are expensive, several feet tall, not easily concealed, and the setup for use is a lengthy process involving the lighting of hot, slow burning coals. Lounges that offer hookah are restricted to those 21 or older, preventing teens from accessing the product. Hookah is also not sold in convenience stores. It can only be purchased at ethnic grocers, specialty tobacco shops or lounges. These factors make hookah unappealing to youth.

Shisha, the product used in hookah, is a combination of tobacco and a sugar substance such as honey or molasses. The total product is only comprised of approximately 15% tobacco. As has been the practice for hundreds of years, hookah is, by nature, a flavored product. Unfortunately, noble efforts to address the teen vaping epidemic by **banning flavored tobacco also would result in the ban of ALL hookah.**

A ban on hookah would not only eliminate this important cultural practice for many U.S. citizens but would also shutter several hookah lounges in Kansas City, which are small, independent, and minority owned businesses. These businesses serve as community gathering places for many immigrant populations. Many hookah users are part of religious or ethnic populations that already face discrimination. Eliminating this cultural practice would make many feel as though they are misunderstood and targeted as an outsider by lawmakers and regulators.

We ask that you do not target this important cultural practice and shutter minority and immigrant owned businesses. We request that you exempt hookah from any flavored tobacco ban.