

Inclusion of the Municipal Zoning Department by the Stamford Prevention Council to Address Proliferation of Smoke Shops in Stamford, Connecticut



FEBRUARY 2-5, 2026
 GAYLORD NATIONAL | NATIONAL HARBOR, MD

Stamford Prevention Council

Presenters: Ingrid Gillespie, MS; Daniella Arias, MPH, CHES, CPS

Emails: Ingrid.Gillespie@LiberationPrograms.org; Daniella.Arias@LiberationPrograms.org (*Liberation Programs Inc is a member agency of Stamford Prevention Council*)

Background

The potential for harm for the developing brain of adolescents from tobacco product use (including vaping) has only become evident recently.¹ The adolescent brain is particularly susceptible to nicotine addiction,² and exposure during adolescence leads to impaired cognition, behavioral issues and an elevated risk of cognitive impairment and psychiatric disorders later in life.¹ Tobacco outlet density around homes is significantly associated with adolescents' past-month smoking behavior.³ The density of tobacco/vape shops near schools has been shown to be correlated with past-30-day use.⁴ In Stamford, the numbers of smoke shops (stores that prominently feature tobacco products) began to increase substantially in early 2023 and some have also become sources for illegal sales of cannabis.⁵

The mission of the Stamford Prevention Council (SPC) in Connecticut is to prevent and reduce youth substance misuse through positive youth and community development. The SPC were frequently asked why there were so many smoke shops in Stamford. In our research to answer that question, we found that there were no state laws regulating the density or locations of retailers of tobacco products. By 2022, Stamford had established restrictions on the locations of smoke shops but no cap on their numbers. Therefore, we sought to recruit the participation of the City of Stamford zoning department to introduce regulations limiting the density and further restrict locations of smoke shops.

Implementation Process and Key Partners

The SPC has more than 65 members representing 20+ agencies. In 2022, the City of Stamford zoning department was invited to join the SPC so that we could solicit their help to limit the numbers and locations of smoke shops. In our regularly scheduled meeting, we presented a map showing the density of tobacco retailers in Stamford and surrounding municipalities (Greenwich and Darien). In Stamford, there were 136 smoke shops (overall population-based density, approximately 1 per 1000 residents) and most were densely clustered in the downtown district (Figure 1). Importantly, the density was greatest in areas that include the highest number of youth at risk for not graduating.

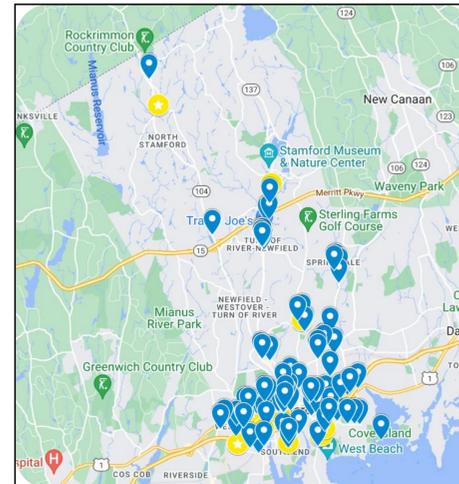


Figure 1. Locations of smoke shops in Stamford.

Results

In July 2023, the Zoning Board passed new rules to define smoke shops, requiring special permits, and restrict their locations and advertising⁶ (effective as of Oct 1, 2023; Figure 2).

Special Permit Requirements	Smoke shops were defined as stores in which 50% or more of the retail space was dedicated to tobacco products or paraphernalia and was required to obtain a special permit and approval from land-use boards .
Distance Requirements	New smoke shops were prohibited from operating within 3,000 feet of any other smoke shop or cannabis dispensary and at least 1,000 feet away from any public or non-public school .
Advertising Restrictions	Smoke shops were prohibited from using illuminated signs, window displays, or storefront advertisements for tobacco products and smoking paraphernalia.
Locations	Sales of tobacco products were restricted to permanent buildings , effectively prohibiting sales from mobile units like food trucks.

Figure 2. Changes to Stamford Zoning Regulations Passed in 2023

In July 2024, more rules were passed to expand the definition of a smoke shop, further restrict their locations, and restrict advertising and signage^{7,8} (effective as of Oct 1, 2024; Figure 3).

Special Permit Requirements	The definition of a "smoke shop" was broadened so that a special permit was required if 10% of retail space was dedicated to tobacco products .
Distance Requirements	New smoke shops were also prohibited from operating within 1000 feet of any community center that provides services to individuals under 21 years old and within 1000 feet of a park or beach .
Advertising Restrictions	Neon signs were included among those prohibited for smoke shops and the maximum allowable window area for signage was decreased from 30% to 15% .
Locations	Smoke shops were prohibited on lots adjacent to or directly across the street from residential districts and specifically prohibited from those defined as Neighborhood Business and Community Business districts.

Figure 3. Additional Changes to Stamford Zoning Regulations Passed in 2024

- The revised rules substantially reduced the available locations for smoke shops (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Zoning districts permitting smoke shops prior to 2024 (A) and after changes introduced in 2024 (B)

Lessons Learned

Municipal zoning authorities can play an important role in limiting the accessibility of tobacco products. Nevertheless, retail outlets that do not fit within the definition of a smoke shop are still a substantial source of tobacco products for which there are currently few regulations concerning their numbers and locations.

Key Takeaways

Coalitions and/or other bodies concerned with the accessibility of tobacco should consider recruiting local zoning authorities in their efforts to restrict the availability of tobacco products. Nevertheless, significantly reducing the availability of tobacco products may require state-level regulations and imposition of caps on the numbers of outlets.

References

- Peterson LA, Hecht SS. *Curr Opin Pediatr*. 2017;29(2):225-230.
- Makadia LD, et al. *Curr Allergy Asthma Rep*. 2017 Aug;17(8):55. doi: 10.1007/s11882-017-0723-0.
- Finan LJ et al. *Tob Control*. 2018; 8;28:27-33.
- Bostean G, et al. *Prev Med Rep*. 2023 Apr 7;33:102198.
- Stamford Advocate, Aug 10, 2024; at <https://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/stamford-zoning-smoke-shops-cannabis-moratorium-19619149.php>.
- Stamford Advocate, July 14, 2023; <https://www.stamfordadvocate.com/local/article/stamford-cannabis-zoning-smoke-shops-18194678.php>.
- Stamford Advocate, Aug 20, 2024; <https://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/article/stamford-smoke-shops-cannabis-dispensaries-19399523.php>.
- SLR International, <https://evogov.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/meetings/79/attachments/17518.pdf>.