

Sixth District U.S. Rep. Diane Black, R-Gallatin, is gaining significant public support for a position she has taken in Congress relating to “roll-your-own” tobacco retailers who are establishing a greater presence almost daily in Wilson County and in much of Middle Tennessee.

Rep. Black recently sponsored House Bill 4134, an act that calls for “roll-your-own” tobacco retailers to be taxed as manufacturers. The proposed legislation would serve to close tax loopholes, support small business owners with a level playing field, and ensure regulations regarding this particular area are fair to all concerned.

Roll-your-own (RYO) cigarette stores are accused of skirting a number of laws by claiming to be tobacco shops while allowing customers to use machines inside these stores to manufacture rolled cigarettes at alarmingly high rates for low prices. A recent report noted that these machines can produce over 200 cigarettes in less than 10 minutes.

For all the speediness of these machines and affordability of their products, they have worrisome faults. RYO cigarettes do not carry the Food and Drug Administration’s mandatory health warnings. The paper used to roll them does not comply with fire standards and perhaps most importantly businesses that allow customers to manufacture these cigarettes evade state taxes and fees associated with the industry that law-abiding traditional retailers must pay. It is no secret that state government, not only in Tennessee but in other states as well, rely heavily on revenue generated from tobacco taxes. Allowing some businesses a free ride is bad for business and bad for Tennessee.

Several states across the country have noted this unfair and unsafe practice and have closed the loophole. Today Arkansas, Idaho, Virginia, South Dakota, Washington and Wyoming have signed legislation to ensure RYO retailers are taxed as manufacturers.

RYO stores threaten the livelihoods of many business owners and their employees in Wilson County and across Tennessee. Law-abiding retailers and convenience store owners will bear the brunt of the current, flawed policy as they suffer for selling properly labeled and properly taxed tobacco products.

'Roll-your-own' stores should pay as others

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We would hope Rep. Black gains substantial support from her colleagues in congress in her effort to pass this important legislation.