



Board of Health Meeting Minutes DRAFT

Date: June 20, 2025

Location: Public Service Administration Building and via Zoom

Members: Tejal K. Gandhi, MD, MPH; Stephen Epstein, MD, MPP, Member; Edward Cosgrove, PhD (Chair); Aarti Sawant-Basak, PhD, Member (Vice Chair)

Staff Present: Timothy Muir McDonald, Director of Health, and Human Services; Tara Gurge, Assistant Director of Public Health; Sai Palani; Ginnie Chacon-Lopez; Julie McCarthy; Karen Shannon; Carol Read

Welcome & Public Comment Period

Dr. Cosgrove called the meeting to order at 9:00AM.

Dr. Epstein suggested that the public comment period be restricted to residents of Needham. Mr. McDonald stated that he would run this by Town Counsel.

According to Chapter 107 of the Acts of 2022, as an act relative to extending certain states of emergency accommodations, as passed by the General Court, and signed into law by Acting Governor Karyn Polito, on July 16, 2022, revised Section 20 of Chapter 20, the Acts of 2021. In so doing, provided modifications to the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law, which allow for flexibility to hold remote only, and hybrid meetings, while preserving public access and, where appropriate, public participation.

Review of minutes – May 20, 2025

Upon motion duly made by Dr. Epstein, and seconded by Dr. Sawant-Basak, it was voted to approve the meeting minutes May 20, 2025, as presented. Motion passed 3-0.

Synthetic Turf Re-testing – Results and Discussion

Evan Koncewicz, Environmental Geologist, and Neal Kelly, Licensed Site Professional, with Fuss & O'Neill, reviewed the recent sampling of crumb rubber on three turf fields in Needham. The company reviewed three categories of compounds: volatile organic compounds (VOCs), semi-volatile organic compounds (SVOCs), and metals. Arsenic concentrations were not detected above laboratory reporting limits but were above risk-based standards. Zinc concentrations were detected above laboratory reporting limits, generally around risk-based standards.

The Board asked for some specific details to be shared by Fuss & O'Neill at an upcoming meeting.

Nicotine Pouches – PUBLIC HEARING & BOARD VOTE

Dr. Cosgrove opened the public hearing at 9:32am.

Karen Shannon stated that in December 2024, the Board voted in favor of adopting the Nicotine Free Generation policy. Article 1, the tobacco sales regulation, allowed the sale of nicotine patches in adult-only retail establishments.

In May the Board agreed to limit the dosage of nicotine pouch products to 6 milligrams and that pouches should be evaluated to confirm that they are unflavored prior to retail sale. Ms. Shannon asked the Board to further restrict the sale of nicotine pouches to adult-only stores to limit youth exposure.

Nicotine pouches are not on the list of cessation tools approved by the FDA. Ms. Shannon spoke about tobacco and nicotine producers' intention to increase the sales of smoke-free products, including nicotine pouches. The tobacco industry has added flavor to nicotine pouches with the intention of capturing young people as customers.

At least nine communities in Massachusetts are using the adult-only retail store language in their tobacco regulations to restrict the sale of nicotine pouches. The Board has an opportunity to, once again, be among the leaders who restrict the sale of nicotine pouches.

Cheryl Sbarra, Executive Director and Senior Staff Attorney for the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards, reminded the Board that combustible products are the only consumer products that, when used as directed, cause death. Nicotine pouches are concerning due to evidence that young people are using them and that the sales of these products have increased substantially. Youth are using nicotine pouches because they can be used very discreetly. Data from last year show that these products have become the second most popular tobacco nicotine product used by youth. Recent flavor tests on nicotine pouches have found that the majority are marketed and labeled as unflavored but actually smell very minty. More testing and studies are being carried out on the pouches, but it is already known that youth use of nicotine in any form is not safe. There is also concern that youth are using more than one pouch at a time. Ms. Sbarra stated that she does not believe limiting the amount or allowing nicotine pouches in adult retail tobacco stores only will stop adults from purchasing these products.

Peter Brennan, Executive Director of New England Convenience Store and Energy Marketers, stated that he opposes any criminalization and/or restriction on legal tobacco products that are used by adults. There is evidence that adults are using these products as a less harmful form of nicotine to quit the more harmful forms of nicotine, such as chewing tobacco or combustible cigarettes. This proposal would be a disservice to those looking to switch to a less harmful product. Regarding the flavor issue, DPH runs tests and lists some items as certified non-flavored. The flavor issue has been a waste of resources and has only enriched New Hampshire. Smoking rates are still the same and menthol smoking rates are still the same. This has significantly impacted Massachusetts retailers. It does nothing to impact youth usage as youth

are getting these products on the black market or online. Needham does seem to need to do more to protect youth, but tobacco usage is not a primary concern.

Dr. Epstein asked for data to back up the assertions made by Mr. Brennan. Mr. Brennan stated that he would send over this information.

Ken Elstein, Board of Health for Belchertown MA, stated that 18 months ago the Town of Belchertown, after considering the option of a 6-milligrams restriction, voted to restrict the sale of nicotine pouches to adult-only stores. As the Town does not have any adult-only stores, this was essentially a total ban. The reasoning for this was that a 6-milligram ban does not prevent people from placing a pouch in each cheek. Mr. Elstein also said that there is anecdotal evidence that some youth swallow the pouches. Merchants have told his board that they trust wholesalers to only send legal, unflavored items, but this is not the case. The Belchertown Health Director told Mr. Elstein that they have only received one complaint in the past 18 months that the pouches could not be obtained in Belchertown. He encouraged the Board to restrict nicotine pouches entirely.

Lydia Cunningham stated that nicotine pouches are discreet, convenient, affordable, and often contain high amounts of nicotine or can be used in multiples at a time. Manufacturers of these products are targeting consumers through rewards programs, marketing related to hip hop culture, celebrities, music, and influencers. All of which makes them attractive to young people. There is statewide data that the sale of these products has drastically increased over the past few years and current use among Massachusetts high school students tripled from 2019 to 2023. She reviewed the 2023 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey report for Needham High School which found that Needham's youth use mirror the data statewide.

Kalina Mihova, a senior at Needham High School and student leader at SALSA, expressed concern about a rise in the use of nicotine patches, among teens in Needham. These products are being marketed as safer alternatives to smoking but they still contain high levels of nicotine and harmful chemicals. Companies are using ads and packaging that directly target youth. According to the 2023 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey approximately 3.3% of Needham High students are using nicotine pouches. Ms. Mihova asked the Board to consider limiting or prohibiting the sale of nicotine pouches in Needham.

Isabel Tashie, a rising senior at Needham High School, stated that a 2021 study found that purchasing tobacco was the primary motivation for store visits for only 3% of consumers and that restricting the retail availability of tobacco would be unlikely to have a pronounced negative impact on small retail stores. The industry's marketing strategy revolves around addicting young adults and children who then continue buying the products well into adulthood. Ms. Tashie stated that she has seen ZYN pouches in the middle school bathroom.

Dr. Epstein asked where students are getting these products from. Ms. Tashie stated that she believes it is mostly from older siblings or those with fake IDs.

Zendilli Depina, MA Department of Public Health Senior Tobacco Prevention Program Specialist, stated that she attended Needham public schools and has worked alongside Ms.

Sbarra. They have been reviewing nicotine pouches by sniffing and tasting them to determine whether or not they were flavored. She stated that she was attending public schools when JUUL came out and saw first-hand how the addiction affected her friends. Banning nicotine pouches to adult-only stores would only impact youth, preventing them from being able to access these products.

Mr. McDonald suggested that restrictions on nicotine pouches could have a more apt comparison to the choice made by public health departments and eventually the Commonwealth to restrict caffeinated alcohol beverage. This was not a prohibition on alcohol but a restriction on a particular type of delivery method that was determined to be dangerous. Restrictions on nicotine patches would have a more apt comparison to that than the prohibition on alcohol.

Dr. Epstein stated that it appears companies are inserting cooling agents into the pouches, so the practical effect is that there is no product on the market right now which is acceptable for sale in Needham. The Board should discuss if, from an enforcement standpoint, it should allow these products to be sold in retail outlets or not. Mr. Palani stated that a vast majority are flavored, though the manufacturers market them as non-flavored. Dr. Epstein suggested that Needham could ban products with flavoring and cooling agents. It would likely make sense to move towards allowing these products in adult-only stores at this time.

Mr. McDonald noted that there is a lot of staff time that would have to go into enforcement for these products. Dr. Gandhi agreed that moving toward allowing the products in adult-only stores would make enforcement more practical. Mr. McDonald noted that the agenda only mentioned restricting the nicotine content. A new agenda topic may be needed if the Board wants to discuss prohibition outside of adult-only stores.

Dr. Cosgrove continued this hearing to the next Board of Health meeting for further discussion.

Mental Health Resources & SWAC Report on Social Media in Schools

Sara Shine, Director of Needham Youth & Family Services (Y&FS), stated that youth mental health issues have increased in Needham. Y&FS provides services to address mental health issues including analyzing data, implementing programming, and providing clinical services. Ms. Shine reviewed recent programs and initiatives and would like to discuss cell phone use and guidance that the Y&FS is trying to coordinate with community members. The Attorney General recently released a toolkit for school leaders and communities regarding cell phone and social media use. The Student Wellness Advisory Committee presented a report to the School Board regarding how schools are going to address cell phone usage. There is a correlation between cell phone use and mental health, in addition to the impact it has on learning. She is looking to organize a group of community members to develop guidance on this topic and potential restrictions.

The Board agreed to take this information into consideration and get back to Ms. Shine with more information.

Proposed New Fee Schedule – BOARD VOTE

Mr. McDonald reviewed the proposed fee schedule with the Board.

Upon motion duly made by Dr. Epstein, and seconded by Dr. Sawant-Basak, it was voted to approve the proposed fee schedule, as revised. Roll Call Vote: Epstein – aye; Cosgrove – aye; Gandhi – aye; and Sawant-Basak – aye; Motion passed 4-0.

May Staff Reports

The Board tabled presentation of the staff reports to a future meeting.

Feedback to Select Board about FY26 Goals and Beyond

Mr. McDonald suggested an additional goal related to community nutrition and food insecurity, especially amongst seniors. Dr. Epstein noted that he would like to see a goal addressing substance use prevention included. Mr. McDonald asked that any additional proposed items should be sent to him.

Other Items

- Next Meeting Date, Location & Time

The Board agreed to hold its next meeting on August 8, 2025, at 9am in the Charles River Room – Public Safety Administration Building

Adjournment

Upon motion duly made by Dr. Epstein, and seconded by Dr. Sawant-Basak, it was voted to adjourn the meeting. Roll Call Vote: Epstein – aye; Cosgrove – aye; Gandhi – aye; and Sawant-Basak – aye; Motion passed 4-0.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:57AM.

Attachment:

June 20, 2025, meeting packet