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E-cig boom leads to tax, regulation questions

WOODBURY, Minn. (AP) — Stores that sell increasingly popular e-cigarettes are popping up around the Twin Cities, highlighting the lack of regulation or taxation of the tobacco alternative.

E-cigarettes are battery powered and produce a nicotine vapor. Owners of stores that sell the devices told the St. Paul Pioneer Press that demand skyrocketed in July when a state tax increase sent cigarette prices up to about \$7.50 a pack.

"Sales were insane," said Angie Griffith, who owns several Smokeless Smoking stores and kiosks.

The surging sales have left regulators scrambling

to react. The federal Food and Drug Administration is expected to release regulations on e-cigarettes soon, but for now there are very few state or federal rules applying to the devices.

That's raised concern that some varieties could serve as an introduction to nicotine for youths. Some come in flavors including root beer, and cookies and cream.

But some former traditional smokers said e-cigarettes helped them kick a tobacco habit. A new Smokeless Smoking store in Woodbury, which opened Nov. 18, has already become a social hub for e-puffers, with its dimly lit lounge with

sofas, TVs, games and books.

Griffith said the ability to form friendships and impromptu support groups with fellow e-cigarette smokers is important in helping customers kick tobacco.

"Smoking" an e-cigarette involves pushing a button on the small metal cylinder, examining its tiny computer screen, applying drops of flavoring and keeping an eye on the battery, then inhaling and exhaling the vapor.

The vaporized liquids come in standard varieties but can also be custom-made. Flavors mimic brands of cigarettes including Marlboro and Camel.

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