

Smokers Help Keep This Arts Hub Alive

A novel cigarette tax has generated \$270 million for cultural organizations in the Cleveland area, which makes declining smoking rates “a double-edged sword.”

By [Michaela Towfighi](#)

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The blue sign attached to the metal fence guarding the Children’s Museum of Cleveland has a clear message: No smoking.

Banning cigarettes on the grounds of the former mansion, as required by state law, protects the young visitors building model cars and staging an imaginary farmers’ market. It also undermines the museum’s budget.

Cuyahoga County, home to Cleveland, is thought to be the only place in the country where a tax on cigarettes goes to arts organizations like the Children’s Museum, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Playhouse Square, the largest domestic theater market outside of Broadway.

At a time when [federal arts funding is in turmoil](#), and when some states have looked to [slash arts budgets entirely](#), the cigarette tax is a crucial funding source. It has put a quarter-billion dollars in the hands of the county’s cultural institutions, which have used the revenue to lower admission fees, expand programming and pay local artists.

The innovative model has been so successful, raising money by making cigarettes more expensive, that it threatened its own demise. Adult smoking rates in Cleveland, which used to be far above the national average, plummeted to 19 percent from 35 percent over the past decade. Tax revenue fell by half.

“It’s a double-edged sword when we see smoking rates decline,” said Sarah Sisser, the executive director of CreativeOhio, an arts advocacy organization.

To keep arts funding robust in Cuyahoga County, voters overwhelmingly approved to more than double the tax rate beginning last year. Advocates are considering potential expansions, like a tax on nicotine pouches, vapes or marijuana, which was legalized in

Ohio in 2023. And in the most recent state budget, lawmakers opened the door for similar cigarette taxes in the counties surrounding Columbus, Cincinnati and Akron.

“We know people in Summit County are supportive of funding the arts,” said Nicole Mullet, who leads ArtsNow, a nonprofit that supports arts programming in Akron and surrounding communities. “That’s no longer the question. The question is exploring whether this mechanism is the right one.”

Arts funding can be precarious. Ticket revenue typically does not cover the true costs of exhibitions, concerts and plays, so organizations rely on a mix of private donations and public dollars. Ohio ranks 14th in the nation for [state arts funding per capita](#).

The cigarette tax in Cuyahoga County was never considered a silver bullet but it is lucrative, generating more than \$270 million since it went into effect in 2007. Over that same period, the entire state of Ohio has received \$48 million in federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This year, Cuyahoga Arts & Culture distributed \$13 million from the cigarette tax to more than 300 organizations. The size of the grants are correlated to the groups’ operating budgets.

In Cleveland, a pack of Malboros costs about \$12 to \$15 before sales tax, a price that includes \$1.60 in state taxes, \$1.01 in federal taxes and \$0.745 in county taxes. The county sends 70 of those cents to cultural organizations, while the extra pennies go to its three professional sports stadiums.

Jury Mirceta, 43, smoked cigarettes daily for nearly two decades, buying three packs of American Spirits a week, until the costs added up. He quit a few years ago and voted in favor of the recent tax increase.

He said arts organizations near his home in Rocky River offered an outlet for his 5-year-old son to “get out of his comfort zone.” Mirceta has taken him to plays at the Beck Center for the Arts and to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, which both received grants from the cigarette tax this year.

“I am grateful for the people that do continue to smoke,” Mirceta said.

Along Euclid Avenue, which was once known as Millionaires’ Row in downtown Cleveland, a line of marquees and Playhouse Square arches welcome visitors to a dozen theaters that have recently staged productions of “The Sound of Music,” “The Outsiders” and “Hell’s Kitchen.”

The theater company also owns apartments, hotels and restaurant space downtown. With grants from the cigarette tax, it has commissioned studies into creating a designated theater district akin to Times Square or the West End, and how to repurpose an old Greyhound bus terminal it recently bought.

“These are good things to push the envelope, but they’re risky,” said Craig Hassall, the president of Playhouse Square, which received a \$1 million grant this year. “But the cigarette tax money is a cushion of that risk.”

The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, which opened in a glass pyramid designed by I.M. Pei in 1995, received \$774,000 in cigarette taxes this year. It has used past funds to stage free concerts on its outdoor plaza, paying local musicians to perform.

“We’re always cost-conscious,” said Greg Harris, the president and chief executive of the organization. “We are running a business, but sometimes it takes that decision off the table and allows you to do something that’s powerful for the community.”

For smaller institutions, the cigarette funding can make up a larger portion of their budgets.

The Children’s Museum bought new art supplies and put on weekend musical performances with some of the \$110,000 it received this year. The North Coast Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen partnered with local high school students to paint portraits of original members with its \$4,250 grant. Karamu House, considered to be [the nation’s oldest producing Black theater](#), received \$127,000 this year; it used previous funds to start a program that gives artists \$5,000 and lets them work in the building’s rehearsal spaces and studios.

“That program allowed us to put dollars, just cold hard cash, in individual visual artists’ hands,” said Aseelah Shareef, the vice president of Karamu House, whose alumni include Langston Hughes and Minnie Gentry.

Cuyahoga County, which borders Lake Erie and has about 1.2 million residents, did not have a dedicated source of arts funding two decades ago. Voters had rejected a property tax proposal, and there was concern about diverting funds from public goods like libraries, community colleges and public health.

An idea to tax V.H.S. rentals never reached a ballot, and voters narrowly approved a tax on cigarettes instead. Support has grown over time, with nearly three-quarters of voters in favor of last year’s increase.

“In a climate when the N.E.A. is being slashed, this ‘little mouse that roared’ tax is delivering benefits under the radar,” Hassall said.

Although the cigarette tax has been an enormous boon, Cuyahoga Arts & Culture projects a revenue decrease of roughly \$1 million each year over the next decade.

As smoking rates continue to decline — the national average fell to 11 percent from 15 percent over the past decade — that will be the case for cigarette taxes across the country, which support early childhood education in California, cancer research in Hawaii and a tobacco cessation program in Maine. Ohio’s state tax goes to its general fund.

“The higher the tax rate for cigarettes, the fewer people will smoke and that’s been proven again and again,” said David Margolius, Cleveland’s director of public health, who supports the county tax.

Last year, the state budget gave Franklin, Hamilton and Summit Counties (home to Columbus, Cincinnati and Akron) permission to ask voters if they wanted to adopt a similar cigarette tax to fund local arts. None of the counties have said they would include that ballot measure in November’s elections.

State legislators also struck one expansion opportunity that would have increased the revenue in Cuyahoga County: a tax on cigarette competitors like vapes. Gov. Mike DeWine was in favor of the expansion, signing a bill to greenlight the tax before it was repealed during the budget process.

In public meetings ahead of the 2024 election in Cuyahoga County, residents voiced concerns that because cigarette sales were rapidly declining, Cuyahoga Arts & Culture needed a different source of funding. But the tax increase passed, taking effect last year.

“It’s the right solution for right now,” said Jill Paulsen, the organization’s executive director. “The only way our community will stay strong is if we keep working together to come up with additional options.”

For some smokers, the extra tax dollars add up. Outside the Cleveland Museum of Art, Paul Jones lit up a cigarette during a break from his shift in the cafe.

He rolls his own. And pays no taxes at all.

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