

The Post and Courier

Firing up cigarette tax

Approval would save lives, money, officials say

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Raising the state's cigarette tax would save lives, discourage children from taking up the habit and shift more of the estimated \$1 billion in annual tobacco-related disease costs back to smokers while providing millions of dollars in new state revenue, officials said Monday.

Reader poll

[Should South Carolina increase the cigarette tax to help pay for health care?](#)

- Yes 76% 1251 votes
- No 23% 376 votes

1627 total votes.

"The higher the taxes, the more lives that we can save. It's time for South Carolina to do what is right for our state," said Dr. Charles P. Darby Jr., Medical University of South Carolina professor emeritus of pediatrics and executive director of the Children's Hospital Center for Child Advocacy.

"Those of us who do not smoke pay higher health insurance premiums and taxes to subsidize the habit of smoking," he said. "It is time the smoker pays for some of the cost."

The state's 7-cents-per-pack tax is the lowest in the nation. A 30-cent increase is before the House as part of the state budget, which will be debated on the floor beginning Monday.

The Senate has a 50-cent increase on the table that the House approved last year. The state has not raised cigarette taxes in more than 30 years.

"Every delay just allows more children to get hooked on cigarettes," Darby said.

The state spends more than \$393 million annually treating sick smokers covered under Medicaid, Darby said. He spoke at the MUSC Children's Hospital during a news conference sponsored by the South Carolina Tobacco Collaborative, a statewide consortium of public health organizations, businesses and individuals working to reduce the toll of tobacco use in the state. Member organizations include the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association and the American Lung Association.



Rep. Chip Limehouse, a Charleston Republican and a ranking member of the House Ways and Means Committee, made the proposal to get the 30-cent increase in the budget. He said a cigarette tax increase is about the only tax increase he could support and that it's more important than ever to pass it now. New cash for Medicaid will free up money for schools, law enforcement and other priorities.

"I would like to see \$1 per pack. Whatever we could get," Limehouse said at the news conference. "Tell your friends to support the Limehouse amendment."

In May 2008, the House was 20 votes short of the total needed to override a veto by Gov. Mark Sanford on a 50-cent increase. At that time, the House and Senate had agreed to use the cash on Medicaid expansions and helping lower-income workers buy health insurance, covering as many as 200,000 more South Carolinians.

The federal government last year raised its tax on a pack by 62 cents to \$1.01. The extra money is being used to expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides care for low-income children.

Sanford for years has pledged to veto any tax increase that does not come with a corresponding decrease.

The governor said again in his State of the State address in January that he wants a cigarette tax increase to be used to cut corporate income taxes to make the state more competitive.



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"We're very much of the same mind as we've been in years past -- that being that we'd definitely be open to an increase in the cigarette tax if it was accompanied by a corresponding tax cut in some other area. In fact, we've proposed just such an action in years past," Ben Fox, communications director for Sanford, said in an e-mail Monday.

The House on Thursday gave key approval to a plan that eliminates the corporate income tax, as a way to make the state more attractive to business, making a cigarette tax increase this year even more likely.

State revenues have plunged by more than \$2 billion in the past three years. Spending is now about \$5 billion. Money from the federal stimulus package will help the state continue to provide some services in the upcoming budget that starts July 1, but that money will be gone the following year.

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