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# Citizens lobby lawmakers on smoking, early-release measures

By [Patrick Marley](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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**West Allis** - Last month, teenager Marco Lira of Milwaukee found a group of 8-year-olds smoking a block from his house.

Lira - a member of the student group Fighting Against Corporate Tobacco, or FACT - asked them why they were smoking. Most looked away, but one told him: "Because it's cool."

"When I heard those words, I wanted to laugh and scream at the same time," Lira told the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee Wednesday. "My brother is 6. When he turns 8, I don't want him to follow the same path."

Lira was joined by a score of middle and high school students urging the committee to ban smoking in bars, restaurants and other public places and raise the cigarette tax by 75 cents a pack.

Others filling a banquet hall at the Tommy G. Thompson Youth Center at State Fair Park told the committee their views on domestic violence programs, pay for prosecutors and public defenders, voucher schools and a host of other issues. Some bore stickers urging the committee to create regional transit authorities.

Convenience store owners wore red shirts that said "I'm not big oil" as a way to ask the committee to kill a proposed tax on gas revenue to pay for roads.

The hearing gave Milwaukee-area residents their first chance to publicly weigh in on the state budget now under consideration. Every two years, lawmakers hold the hearings to gauge public sentiment before they begin voting on how to shape the state's spending plan.

The Joint Finance Committee will begin deciding next month how to amend the budget Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle proposed in February.

The budget must close a shortfall of more than \$5 billion over two years. Democrats in the Legislature have shown support generally for Doyle's plan to eliminate that gap by raising taxes, cutting services and capitalizing on federal economic stimulus money.

Among other things, Doyle's plan would allow some nonviolent inmates to be released early; close mostly rural driver's license stations; eliminate the voucher school "funding flaw" that hurts Milwaukee property-tax payers; require voucher students to take the same standardized tests administered in public schools; provide

limited legal benefits to same-sex couples; and allow local governments to create regional transit authorities that could levy a 0.5% sales tax.

Democratic lawmakers have shown a willingness to depart from Doyle on some issues. For instance, they appear ready to modify - rather than eliminate - tax credits for the film industry.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett asked the committee to give the city the option to impose telephone charges to help cover the costs of services such as 911 and the authority to create a 0.15% sales tax to help cover public safety costs.

Milwaukee County Board Chairman Lee Holloway also asked for the authority to raise the sales tax, saying the county needs help paying for buses, parks and emergency medical services.

Milwaukee County Sheriff David A. Clarke Jr. asked the committee to abandon Doyle's plan to release some inmates early, saying the \$27 million that could be saved over two years would be offset by the higher costs incurred by local governments to fight increased crime.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving is also fighting the provision. In a letter to the committee, MADD National President Laura Dean-Mooney said lawmakers must ensure drunken drivers serve their full sentences.

"There should be no exceptions," Dean-Mooney wrote. "Drunk driving is 100 percent preventable and offenders choose to drive drunk."

But Jim Koneazny, a former prison chaplain, said releasing inmates early is crucial to reintegrating offenders into society.

"Earned release is the only way to go," he said. "We've got to save taxpayer money, but we've also got to save lives."

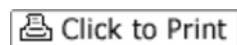
## MORE PUBLIC HEARINGS

The Joint Finance Committee will hold four more public hearings on the state budget: Friday at the Haas Fine Arts Center at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire; Monday at Case High School in Racine; April 1 at Lawrence University's Stansbury Theater in Appleton; and April 3 at the Amundson Community Center in Cambridge. Each public hearing is scheduled to start at 10 a.m. and end at 4 p.m.

A listening session on the budget will be held Saturday at Ashland High School.

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