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Do more to help smokers quit

A Wisconsin State Journal editorial
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If Wisconsin is going to stick smokers with another cigarette tax hike, it should at least give them more help in kicking their expensive and unhealthy habit.

Instead, Gov. Jim Doyle's two-year budget would [cut anti-tobacco programming](#) by 5.6 percent while raising the cigarette tax 43 percent.

That's not fair.

The Legislature should boost anti-smoking programs -- especially those that help people quit -- if it keeps Doyle's cigarette tax hike in the state budget. And moving forward, the state needs to start planning for falling revenue from the tobacco tax to show it's serious about its stated goal of far fewer state residents lighting up.

That state can't have it both ways. State leaders must either cut smoking rates and lose hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue over time from cigarettes, or they should admit they're balancing the state budget on the backs of smokers with no serious plan to help them shake the habit.

Higher taxes on cigarettes can be justified as user fees -- to a point -- if the proceeds are spent on a corresponding service or expense.

The state justified its \$1 per-pack tax hike two years ago by dedicating most of the money to government health care programs for low-income people who suffer from smoking-related illnesses. The state also has justified higher cigarette taxes as a way of dissuading teenagers from starting to smoke. Higher cigarette taxes also can help pressure more adult smokers to quit.

But Doyle's budget offers smokers a fatter stick and a scrawnier carrot. It tells smokers to quit smoking or pay through the nose. It takes most of the tax proceeds to balance the state budget without boosting efforts to help smokers give quitting their best shot.

Wisconsin already boosted its cigarette tax in January 2008 by \$1 to \$1.77 per pack. As a result, calls to the state's Tobacco Quit Line nearly tripled.

Now Doyle wants to increase the state cigarette tax by an additional 75 cents to \$2.52 per pack starting Sept. 1. On top of that, the federal government will increase its cigarette tax by 61 cents to \$1 per pack starting April 1.

That means a pack of cigarettes could cost close to \$7 in Wisconsin by fall.

Doyle's spokesman Lee Sensenbrenner insists the state's Quit Line will "get all the funding it needs." We hope that's the case. Yet Sensenbrenner acknowledged Tuesday that overall anti-smoking efforts are being trimmed, with promotion and advertising of the Quit Line likely to shrink.

The Legislature should make sure state smokers get what they pay for -- a better shot at finally snuffing out their bad habit.

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