

OUR VIEW

Keep cigarette tax proposal

The health of people in Wisconsin — especially children — should be a priority in setting up a state budget. That's why there is one tax increase that Democrats and Republicans alike should embrace — a \$1.25 per pack increase in the tax on cigarettes.

The money raised will be used to bring the state's **anti-tobacco** efforts — cut in half in 2001 — back to levels recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and be used to

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offset health
care costs**

offset some of the \$448 million the state spends each year in tobacco-related Medicare bills. When one throws in private insurance, the cost of treating tobacco-related illnesses in one year in Wisconsin comes to \$2 bil-

lion — a fifth of the total expenditures.

An increase in the cost of cigarettes will be a deterrent to younger smokers and could prompt some current smokers to quit. According to the Campaign for **Tobacco-Free Kids**, the increase would translate into 84,000 fewer young people picking up the habit and 42,000 adults quitting.

So far, the Joint Committee on Finance and the Senate have approved the tax increase, while the Assembly has not only cut out the tax increase, but cut the funding for tobacco control programs from an already-inadequate \$10 million a year to \$2.5 million.

The conference committee that must work out budget differences has a big hurdle to overcome here, but it's clear it should come down on the side of public health. The tax increase and funding for **anti-tobacco** efforts is what is needed.