

## OUR VIEWS

# Raise tax to snuff out smoking habit

Raising the state's cigarette tax is a good idea for a pack of reasons. But we have no faith that the extra revenue will be used as intended.

Normally we would oppose any new tax. However, the possible benefits are too great in this case.

The Healthy Wisconsin Committee, appointed by Gov. Jim Doyle, recommends boosting the tax by \$1 per pack to raise about \$277 million a year and fund health care coverage for about 160,000 residents. The group suggests using the money to expand the state's Medicaid program, which covers the elderly, disabled and low-income people; and to create a re-insurance pool for catastrophic care claims so insurance is more affordable for small businesses. Expanding Medicaid would

generate another \$378 million in federal matching funds.

Wisconsin's cigarette tax is 77 cents. The national average is \$1, and Michigan's tax is \$2. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each pack sold here costs \$9.53

## HELPING YOU QUIT

Smoke Free Society has a free "Proven Stop Smoking Technique" download available at [www.SmokeFreeSociety.org](http://www.SmokeFreeSociety.org) to help people keep the No. 1 New Year's resolution.

The society also offers other effective, self-help, quit-smoking plans, services, information and free, easy-to-send eCards.

The society is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to helping smokers quit and educating kids not to start smoking or use tobacco.

in care for smoking-related illnesses and lost worker productivity.

The tax increase would help many state residents keep New Year's resolutions. It would encourage an estimated 34,000 adults to quit smoking and keep about twice that many kids from the addiction.

The tax boost would save millions in preventable health care costs, much of which Wisconsin taxpayers now bear, Wisconsin Hospital Association President Steve Brenton says.

All those benefits would make the tax increase logical, and a recent statewide American Cancer Society poll shows 77 percent back a \$1 increase. But it's no "political slam dunk," as WHA Senior Vice President Eric Borgerding suggests. Many lawmakers, especially Republicans who control the Assembly, avoid tax increases like the plague.

Sen. Mike Ellis, R-Neenah, blasted the proposal as a money grab against an easy target in smokers and an easy pot of money to expand spending.

Still, Sen. Judy Robson, D-Beloit, who is incoming Senate majority leader, believes she has enough votes in the Senate to support an increase, though not one that large.

However, our main concern is spending the money the right way. Doyle says he would support the increase only if the money is reserved for smoking-related illnesses and programs to prevent smoking and to help smokers quit.

But Doyle is part of the problem. He has swiped an estimated \$1.1 billion from the state's transportation coffers—supposedly segregated funds—to pad other spending.

Before Doyle took office, the state was awarded a \$6 billion settlement from the tobacco industry, and part of it was supposed to help snuff out smoking. It quickly went up in smoke as our elected leaders frittered it away for a fraction of its long-term value to fill budget deficits.

If the state can create an ironclad guarantee that the money from a higher cigarette tax would be used as proposed, we would support it wholeheartedly. But if such an assurance exists anywhere, we'd like to know of it. The track record for our elected officials lacks credibility. They've shown time and again that they're addicted to spending supposedly segregated funds elsewhere.

## Gazette Editorial Board

*Gazette editorials reflect the opinions of the editorial board. Most are written by Editorial Page Editor Greg Peck; Editor Scott Angus writes the rest.*

*Other members of the editorial board are: Sidney H. Bliss, publisher; David A. Johnson, general manager; Mary Jo Villa, circulation director and vice president-human resources, Bliss Communications; Pam Milheiser, executive secretary for Bliss Communications; and John McPoland, sports reporter and page designer.*