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Raise taxes on cigarettes and impose smoking restrictions

By Tribune editorial board

Two developments in the fight against smoking deserve comment.

On the local level, the La Crosse Area Health Initiative, a group of health professionals and citizens, is pushing for a ban on smoking in all workplaces — including bars and bowling alleys.

On the state level, Gov. James Doyle has changed his mind about raising taxes on cigarettes — and now says he would go along with a \$1-a-pack increase in cigarette taxes as long as the proceeds are used for smoking cessation efforts or to pay for health costs.

We think the time has come for both proposals to come to pass.

At issue with workplace smoking is the health and safety of the employees, as well as customers. The toughest sell in workplace smoking bans will be taverns, which attract a larger proportion of smokers than most other places.

Still, the time has come to address this issue head-on. Tavern smoking bans have been done in California, New York and other places. It's time to consider one for La Crosse.

As for the \$1-a-pack cigarette tax, there are two good reasons for it. First, higher prices would discourage young people from smoking. That alone would be reason enough.

But a secondary reason is that the health costs of smoking are borne by a much broader range of society than just smokers. Members of the public pay for health-care costs of smokers who don't have health insurance — either through their taxes or in higher health-care costs because health-care institutions raise their prices to pay for free care that they give.

In a story by The Associated Press, Doyle said of the tax, "To the extent that it is used to keep young people from starting to smoke, helping people who are addicted stop and helping to pay the cost of tobacco-related illnesses, it makes some really good sense."

He's right. The time has come.

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