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# Tobacco tax issue to spark hot battle

By Kathy Zimmerman  
The Tribune

SACRAMENTO — A proposed 25-cent tobacco tax increase on the November ballot promises to provoke as emotional a battle as those waged between smokers and non-smokers over demands for clean air in restaurants, airplanes and worksites.

Proposition 99, one of 29 measures to be decided by California voters in the Nov. 8 general election, would raise the current 10-cent tax on a pack of cigarettes to 35 cents. An equivalent tax hike would be imposed on other tobacco products.

The 25-cent increase would

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raise an estimated \$650 million annually, providing \$130 million for anti-smoking educational programs for youngsters, \$32.5 million for cancer and heart and lung disease research, and \$32.5 million for park improvements.

About \$293 million annually, 45 percent of the additional tax revenue, would go to reimburse hospitals and doctors for costs

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## Tobacco

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incurred in treating California's 5 million uninsured patients.

The state Legislature would have the authority to divvy up the remaining \$162 million among those four specified uses or on fire prevention programs.

Not surprisingly, the tobacco industry has mounted an expensive, intensive campaign to defeat the tax increase.

Estimates of the tobacco industry's commitment to defeat the measure run as high as \$16 million.

Jeff Raimundo, a consultant working on the tobacco industry's campaign, Californians Against Unfair Tax Increases, last week denied the cigarette companies will spend that much money. While declining to reveal just how much the tobacco companies will invest in the campaign, Raimundo said the \$16 million figure was off by several million dollars.

The tobacco companies' money and clout have been effective in aborting previous legislative attempts to raise the tax. California has the fifth lowest tobacco tax in the nation, and it has not been raised in 20 years.

Supporters of the tax say the growing public sentiment against smoking will help propel them to victory. Twenty-five percent of California adults smoke today, compared to 32 percent in 1980.

If the tax were raised to 35-cents per cigarette pack, California would have the third highest tobacco levy in the nation.

Supporters of Proposition 99, who expect to spend \$2.5 million on the campaign, say ultimately voters will decide who they trust — the tobacco industry opposing the initiative or its medical field proponents.

"Do you trust the tobacco industry to give you information on the health risks of tobacco?" asked Dr. Donald C. Rifus, a Sacramento pulmonary physician.

"We expect them to fight it with all the money they've got," said Carolyn Martin of the American Lung Association of California.

"We'll be challenging their credibility, asking voters, 'Who do you trust? The tobacco companies?' I don't think so," Martin said.

"It is a very emotional issue," said the tobacco industry's campaign consultant Raimundo.

"They've got some strong feelings on their side. We all know the anti-smoking tidal wave sweeping across the country right now.

"All we're trying to say is

you've got to set aside that emotional rhetoric and look at the initiative itself. Despite their claims to the contrary, they are being very misleading about what it does."

Supporters of the tax say it will force smokers to shoulder the societal burdens they impose by their habit. California taxpayers currently spend \$2 billion a year on health costs of smokers.

Raimundo points out that the 45 percent share of the proceeds generated by the tax increase that doctors and hospitals will get, does not specify reimbursement only for treatment of smoking-related illnesses.

He claims organizations such as the American Cancer Society are fronting as the "white hat sponsors" of the initiative, when in reality it was fueled by the powerful, money-hungry California Medical Association.

The tobacco industry campaign has already spent \$200,000 on controversial radio advertisements against the tax increase.

The ads have portrayed the measure as an unfair tax on the poor, calling it a "self-serving rip-off" by doctors and hospitals.

The sponsors of Proposition 99, the Coalition for a Healthy California, plan to take advantage of free fairness doctrine time on the radio to launch their own offensive. They also will purchase television time.

One of their ads will feature a 52-year-old ex-smoker suffering from emphysema receiving oxygen and asking voters to support the tax. The man died shortly after filming the ad.

Other ads will attack the tobacco companies, saying all they care about is protecting their profits.

Supporters claim 100,000 children will be deterred from taking that first puff by way of the higher per pack price and the educational programs on the dangers of smoking that the tax will help fund.

About 5,000 people quit smoking or die each day from related diseases.

Martin said she's amazed the tobacco industry is acting as defender of the poor in its commercials.

"The sheer hypocrisy of the tobacco companies is astounding," she said, noting the price for a pack of cigarettes has risen 280 percent in the last 20 years.

"They made \$2 billion last year just from cigarettes ...," said Martin. "It sounds hollow when their ads say they have a great concern for the pocketbooks of poor working families."

Thirty thousand Californians die each year from smoking-related diseases.

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