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HOUSE WEIGHS FIREFIGHTER\*SMOKING\*BAN

TALLAHASSEE -- A bill to ban\*smoking\*by future Florida\*firefighters\*was kept alive on Thursday in the state House in spite of an effort to amend the bill by adding alcohol consumption as an employment issue.

The House voted 58-43 to require prospective\*firefighters\*to be alcohol-free for a year before they apply, but the amendment by Rep. Randy Mackey was reconsidered with more members present and defeated 66-46.

"There's too much government out of Tallahassee, and here we go again," said the Lake City Democrat. "If tobacco is a problem, then alcohol is a greater problem. ... Are we going to be hypocritical in this chamber and say tobacco products are bad while alcoholism is OK?"

He also offered an amendment that would have required applicants to show they had low cholesterol levels but that also was defeated.

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A final vote on the bill (HB 1456) could be called as early as today.

Although Mackey painted himself as an advocate for healthier\*firefighters,\*

he was accused of trying to kill the bill by adding too many requirements.

"What we're trying to do here is love this bill to death," said Rep. Ron Silver, D-North Miami Beach.

Supporters said at least 15 fire departments in Florida already bar new hires from\*smoking\*and chewing tobacco as a way to cut health insurance rates.

Heart disease is a common affliction of\*firefighters,\*and tobacco has been shown to be a major cause of heart and lung disease. Insurers complain the cause of\*firefighters'\*medical and disability claims for heart disease cannot be determined when\*smoking\*is a factor.

Sponsoring Rep. Buzz Ritchie, D-Pensacola, said the measure was supported by\*firefighters\*and even "the Dalmatians are wagging their tails in the firehouses."

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