

# News and Observer

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## **A sure slam-dunk for North Carolina**

From former UNC basketball coach Dean Smith, a commentary urges the General Assembly to boost cigarette taxes.

AN ALARMING NUMBER of North Carolina children start to smoke cigarettes every day. A much-needed increase of the cigarette tax would begin to solve that problem.

I have seen the statistics: 66 North Carolina children become regular smokers every day. Even an old coach like me can do the math on this --every year more than 24,000 Tar Heel kids begin a lifetime of smoking. Over time, the impact on their health will be devastating; smoking can lead to a lifetime of addiction, disease and early death.

Increasing the price of tobacco products is the most effective way to keep kids from starting to smoke, since most will not have enough allowance to afford cigarettes. The General Assembly should raise the tax on cigarettes by at least 70 cents, bringing the cost of popular brands to between \$3.50 and \$3.80 a pack. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that for every 10 percent we increase the price of a pack of cigarettes, 7 percent fewer children will begin to smoke. Such an increase would prevent more than 100,000 North Carolina kids from beginning to smoke.

I smoked for close to 30 years before stopping 15 years ago, so I know what I am talking about when it comes to the health effects and the addictive nature of cigarettes. Unlike most of today's kids, who begin smoking at an average age of 13, I did not start smoking cigarettes until I entered the U.S. Air Force at 23. Even with that late start, I found it was very, very difficult to stop. That is why it is so important to me that we prevent children from starting to smoke.

Our legislative leaders face many difficult decisions this year, and I respect much of what they have accomplished to date. Raising the tax on cigarettes would decrease the number of children who begin to smoke. In addition, the extra income, as much as \$400 million by some estimates, would allow money to be used to fight poverty through social programs, which have been cut back.

By passing a 70-cent tax increase on cigarettes, the General Assembly will provide much-needed funds and protect the lives and health of our North Carolina children. Raising this tax is a slam dunk for North Carolina.

Sunday, June 22, 2003

### **A healthier tax**

It's hard to argue with claims from the medical community that reducing the number of smokers in North Carolina would bring impressive health and financial benefits. Yet legislators remain hung up on the question of increasing the state's 5-cent-a-pack cigarette tax, the nation's third lowest.

The N.C. Common Cause Education Fund argues in a report, moreover, that the campaign contributions and lobbying of the tobacco industry and its allies cultivate such influence at the Legislative Building that both a tobacco tax hike and financial support for smoking prevention and cessation programs face an uneven fight.

The Common Cause report cites figures in support of its statement that tobacco industry contributions to politicians in the legislative and executive branches "have risen dramatically during the last four election cycles" -- even while, as the report notes, "tobacco's impact on the state's economy and culture has declined." It turns out that the industry, allied lobbyists and farmers have given more than \$2 million to state-level candidates since 1995. That kind of money figures to get a hearing from legislators and governors whenever crunch time comes.

Even so, there is more than a simple quid pro quo involved this year in the tobacco tax tussle. In its budget so far, the state House rejects the Senate's proposal to raise \$330 million through increases in cigarette and alcohol taxes.

This added revenue is needed to provide or maintain important services, but the proposal has run smack into the campaign pledge of some House members against raising any tax. If they have one ear turned to the tobacco lobby, these lawmakers have pretty clearly become deaf in the one that the Senate and the N.C. Health Alliance are speaking into. In addition, given tobacco's long and prominent presence in the economy of this state, some legislators are hesitant to risk adding to the troubled industry's problems.

One would hope, however, that the hearing of House members quickly improves. North Carolina has not, after all, raised its cigarette tax since 1991. Its 5-cent-a-pack tax compares to a national average tax of 67 cents that could run as high as 82 cents by the end of the year.

Further, the Senate has proposed a tax hike of no more than 25 cents, which is a far cry from the 75 cents promoted earlier by doctors and others in the medical community. They are especially interested in helping dissuade Tar Heel youngsters from beginning to smoke. The doctors make the argument that smoking is a major risk factor or outright cause of the four most common causes of death in North Carolina: heart disease, cancer, strokes, and chronic obstructive lung disease, including emphysema.

Despite the millions of dollars that tobacco growing and manufacturing and the collection of tobacco taxes generate, the costs in health care, especially in Medicaid, and in premature deaths and lost income continue to make the cigarette habit an expensive proposition for the state. A 25-cent-a-pack tax increase is no sinecure -- but it might help ease the pain a bit.