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Should South Carolina raise its cigarette tax?

by Ben Robinson

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Let's face it: Everybody is desperate for money these days.

The guys in Columbia are faced with an interesting problem: They have to balance the budget with far less money available than a decade ago.

S.C. State law requires the legislature to balance the budget each year, unlike their counterparts in Washington, where it seems to be a law against balancing the budget.

So lawmakers are faced with two choices, with a combination of the two as a third option. They can raise taxes and they can make cuts in expenditures.

One of the more popular ideas is to raise the state's cigarette tax, which is among the lowest in the country. More than likely, the influence of tobacco farmers in the Lowcountry has had an influence on the lower cigarette tax. But much of the tobacco farming industry is disappearing from South Carolina in favor of more profitable — and healthy — crops.

Cigarette smoker, understandably, are more likely to be against the tax increase. Everybody, as we said, is needing money these days, and paying extra for a bad habit can be costly.

One could argue that perhaps such a tax would encourage somebody to quit an unhealthy lifestyle, but is that really the role of government? What would be next? A cheeseburger tax, to keep us from loading up on fattening food?

So for this week's online Progress Poll, we ask if you feel South Carolina should raise its cigarette tax. But we ask voters to go one step further, and tell us where the money from the new tax should go.

Probably the most popular idea is for the money to go toward healthcare. After all, one might argue, smoking causes many of the problems that have made healthcare more expensive. Shouldn't the tax deal with the problems that the product causes?

But healthcare coffers have already benefitted from class action lawsuits against the tobacco companies. Wouldn't directing cigarette tax money toward healthcare be a case of double dipping?

Another idea is for the money to go to schools. School districts across the state are bracing for more cutbacks on state education money. Teachers are being forced to take unpaid furloughs, and class sizes are likely to increase.

Money from the South Carolina Education Lottery is mostly earmarked for scholarships, although the Legislature can change that.

Some have suggested that depending on cigarette tax money to fund schools would be following in the footsteps of a change in state law several years ago that led to the primary funding of schools not to come from property taxes but from sales taxes. When sales are down due to a bad economy, there is less tax money coming in for schools.

By the new proposal, when cigarette use declines, less money would be available for the schools.

We can imagine the bumper stickers we'll see if education in the state is primarily funded by the lottery and cigarette tax money: "I smoke and gamble to that your kid can be smarter."

A third option would be to use the extra money from a cigarette tax increase as part of the state's general fund, giving our legislators a free hand to direct the dollars to where they are needed most.

So what do you think? Go to www.theeasleyprogress.com and vote. You will be given four options. One would be not to raise the cigarette tax in South Carolina. The other three would be to raise the tax and direct it to healthcare, schools or the state's general fund.

If you would like to make comments on your answer, email brobinson@theeasleyprogress.com. Please let us know if we can use your name with your response in next week's Easley Progress.

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