

Florida Faith Leaders Support Tobacco Tax Hike

✖ **April 2, 2009** – A day after the largest single federal tobacco tax increase went into effect, Florida faith leaders today announced support for a bill that would further raise the cost of smoking in their state by \$1 per pack of cigarettes.

At a press conference held outside 7,000-member First Baptist Church of Orlando, representatives from groups ranging from the Christian Coalition of Florida to the Islamic Society of Central Florida said the proposed tax hike could help deter smoking, particularly among youth, and raise revenue to help meet the state's severe budget shortfall.

"This is one of those issues where we can see a clear nexus between behavior and health-care costs," said former Republican state Rep. Dennis K. Baxley, who now heads the Christian Coalition of Florida. "It's very reasonable. I look at that as a user fee, that folks who choose to use tobacco products are investing in the health care costs that follow."

Nationally, a federal tobacco tax increase went into effect Wednesday, raising the tax from 39 cents per pack of cigarettes to \$. The tax hike, which affects other tobacco-related products including cigars and smokeless tobacco, will fund the State Children's Health Insurance Program for lower-income children.

Supporters said the Florida tobacco tax hike, which the state's Senate Finance and Tax Committee passed unanimously Tuesday, would generate about \$900 million. They argue that the additional revenue could offset the \$1.2 billion Florida spends on Medicaid programs to treat health problems resulting from smoking.

In addition to Florida, at least two dozen states are considering similar tobacco tax increases this year. Vincent DeMarco, national coordinator for Faith United Against Tobacco, said there is a groundswell of faith-based support for anti-smoking initiatives.

He said 25 faith leaders, including Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, backed legislation to empower the Food and Drug Administration to regulate tobacco. The bill passed today in the House.

"Faith groups from across the political spectrum are working on reducing smoking," DeMarco said. "[They] see this as a moral issue because they know lives can be saved by it."

If the proposed tax hike were enacted, Florida smokers would still pay less in taxes for a pack of cigarettes than tobacco users in 19 states and the District of Columbia. At 34 cents per pack of cigarettes, Florida's tobacco tax is one of the lowest in the nation.

"For the past 19 years, Florida hasn't increased its user fee," said Thomas J. Harrington of the American Heart Association, which sponsored the press conference. "We're in the bottom five when it comes to user fees."

But the religious leaders aren't concerned only about the state's budget. Although a proposed gambling bill could generate \$1 billion in revenue, Baxley said expanding slot machines is the wrong way to meet the state's financial challenges.

"Clearly, we at the Christian Coalition of Florida would see this type of user fee as a much more appropriate approach to meeting the medical needs of Florida than the board expansions of predatory gambling," said Baxley, who has described slot machines as the "crack cocaine" of gambling.

Organizations such as the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids say tobacco taxes reduce the number of teen smokers by roughly 6 percent. In Florida, supporters say that could translate into 165,000 teens who never start smoking.

"We believe the statistics are clear-if you raise taxes on tobacco, [among] youth and kids there will be a decrease [in smoking]," said Dr. Lewis Edwards, Health Ministries Director for the Southeast Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. "We're concerned about the health of our kids."

Imam Hatim of the Islamic Society of Central Florida said his organization previously joined with Christians and other faith groups in opposing gambling in the state, arguing that its harm outweighs its financial benefits. He says the tobacco tax is similarly a moral issue.

"It's not a political issue to us, it's not a tax or money issue, it is simply a saving lives issue," he said. "We would support leaders of any faith, of any political affiliation who are serious on helping reduce tobacco use, especially among young people, and preventing young people from getting into the habit."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says cigarette smoking leads to more than 438,000 premature deaths each year and costs \$193 billion in health care costs and lost time from work, the Associated Press (AP) reported. Smoking also contributes to heart disease, cancer and lung disease.

A spokesman for Philip Morris USA, the nation's largest tobacco company, said the federal tax increase would likely accelerate an ongoing decline in smoking, the AP reported. Philip Morris and other tobacco companies have been raising their prices to offset losses from the federal tax hike.