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## Should voters approve I-773, raising tobacco taxes to fund health care?

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**Supporters of Initiative 773 argue that costlier cigarettes will deter many teenagers from smoking.**



A charcoal treatment of a photo by The News Tribune/2000

**Yes: Increased cigarette tax will curb youth smoking, cut health costs, create \$150 million in state revenue.**

Washington is hurtling toward an economic crisis, but it may not be the one you know about. Our 10th, eighth and even fifth-graders are becoming addicted to cigarettes at an alarming clip, spelling chronic illness and premature death for thousands. At the same time, more than 750,000 of our working friends and neighbors are without health insurance and the numbers are growing.

These are festering problems just waiting to erupt. And when they do, Washington will be faced with avoidable health care costs exceeding \$1 billion each year.

Initiative 773 gives us the opportunity to dramatically improve the health and health care of the people in our state through a 60-cent increase per pack of cigarettes. The Office of Financial Management estimates that I-773 will generate an additional \$150 million each year for Washington state. This price increase, the most effective way to drive down smoking rates, will go to expand the Basic Health Plan to 50,000 new people, fully fund the state's Tobacco Prevention and Control Program and finance low-income disease-prevention programs.

Any revenues lost through fewer cigarette sales will be more than made up through the higher tax, as has been the experience across the board for other states.

Higher cigarette prices and a strong tobacco-prevention will quickly translate into fewer kids addicted to cigarettes and fewer cigarettes smoked throughout the state. The tobacco executives who oppose I-773 call it a "risky scheme" and a "dismal failure." But talk to those who care about the health of children and families -- such as the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association and the American Cancer Society -- all of whom support I-773 and the health programs it will fund. Or talk to other states that raised tobacco taxes -- such as Oregon, California, Alaska, Massachusetts or Arizona. The effect of a tobacco tax is about as close to a sure thing as it gets.

Every single state that has raised tobacco taxes has generated millions in additional revenues while watching smoking rates plummet. This is exactly why the tobacco industry will pour money into the campaign against I-773. After Oregon raised tobacco taxes by 30 cents per pack, youth smoking dropped by 41 percent. California raised taxes 25 cents per pack, and smoking among kids decreased 43 percent. These tax increases were only half the size of what I-773 proposes.

The impact I-773 will have on youth addition to cigarettes is not smoke and mirrors. It is fact.

Ninety percent of adult smokers start before the age of 18, making a tobacco tax in Washington critical sooner rather than later. Teenagers are less willing and less able to pay higher prices for cigarettes, making price hikes exceptionally effective in deterring teens from taking up regular smoking. Tobacco-prevention programs that counter the insidious effects of tobacco marketing are the other key element in preventing youth from starting habits. The positive effects of tobacco-prevention programs have been documented in hundreds of studies.

The tobacco industry sees today's kids as tomorrow's pack-a-day smokers. That's why the tobacco giants spend well over \$100 million on persuasive advertising in Washington each year, at least six times the current state budget for tobacco prevention. Tobacco marketing is the single most influential factor in getting kids to smoke -- stronger than parental influence, peer pressure, race or age. The upshot is one in four Pierce County high school students is hooked by graduation.

I-773 will fully restore Washington's Tobacco Prevention and Control program to stop tobacco addiction before it starts. Currently, deep legislative cuts forced the elimination of school programs for grades K-4 and 10-12. These kids are receiving a steady diet of tobacco advertising with no alternative messages.

The final gain for health in Washington will come from expansion of the Basic health Plan. I-773 will extend no-frills BHP insurance to 50,000 additional low-income adults who otherwise couldn't afford preventative care or needed medical services like eyeglasses. In Pierce County, more than 18,000 people served by five health plans are covered under the BHP safety net. But more than 49,000 individuals go without, and the number is growing.

Over the past few years Washington's uninsured rate has steadily climbed to almost 16 percent, a rate higher than that for Arkansas, Alabama and Kentucky and higher than the national average as well.

Seven of 10 uninsured individuals come from working families. Low-income workers are far less likely to have access to health care through work, but they often make too much money to qualify for Medicaid. For these families, the Basic Health Plan is their only option, but funding shortages and program caps keep 400,000 eligible individuals shut out of the program. Allowing this many people to go without health care insurance leads to poor health and higher costs for everyone.

Poor health accompanies lack of health care insurance. Almost 40 percent of uninsured individuals cannot afford recommended tests or treatments, and 30 percent cannot afford to fill a needed prescription. Because the uninsured must delay needed care, they are more likely than their insured counterparts to have problems with pregnancy and childbirth, more likely to die, and much more likely to end up in the hospital or emergency room. Because they cannot cover their costs, the bills get passed on to taxpayers and the insured in the form of higher taxes and increased medical costs.

Both smoking and lack of health insurance are extremely costly. Smoking-related medical costs alone add up to over \$1 billion annually in Washington. Without intervention today, we face a problem of much larger dimension tomorrow.

I-773 will expand access to health care to low-income people throughout the state, while simultaneously slashing youth addiction and tobacco-related health care costs. Rarely do we get the opportunity to save lives and money at the same time. We'll be a healthier state if we take the chance while we have it.

## About the Authors

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