

Tobacco programs should have funds

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With tobacco cash pouring into Trenton, it's sinful that anti-smoking programs are being axed.

While we're generally in support of the sweeping cuts Gov. Chris Christie has proposed across all sectors of government, there's one cut that shouldn't happen. There's no excuse whatsoever for not having dedicated funding from one of two huge revenue streams.

As Courier-Post staff blogger Mike Franolich reported on his blog about quitting smoking, next year's state budget calls for axing the just under \$10 million New Jersey spends on tobacco control and cessation programs.

The amount being cut is a drop in the bucket -- and we're not talking about a drop compared to the \$11 billion state budget deficit that must be closed with cuts. Every little bit of cutting counts toward closing the gap. This cut will help close the gap.

The \$10 million is a drop in the bucket compared to the roughly \$1 billion in tobacco money that pours into the Garden State's coffers every year, money that should cover our state's meager tobacco programs a thousand times over.

First, New Jersey has the fifth-highest tax on cigarettes in the nation at \$2.70 per pack. The tax was just increased to that amount earlier this month. The average tax on cigarettes among the 50 states is \$1.38 per pack, according to the nonprofit Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

New Jersey has hiked its tobacco tax so often in recent years that three years ago, after one those hikes lifted the per-pack tax from \$2.40 to \$2.575, revenue the state collected from the tax dropped from \$787 million in 2006 to \$764 million in 2007.

Despite the diminishing amount being collected, we're still talking about a tax that brings in well over half a billion dollars annually to the state. What, a mere \$10 million of that can't be dedicated to maintaining very modest programs to educate people about the dangers of smoking and to help smokers quit?

Second, since 2001, the state has received more than \$220 million each year in settlement payments from the major tobacco companies. Last year, the state collected \$287.4 million, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, which keeps track of tobacco settlement funds sent to each state. Altogether, since New Jersey began getting money from the massive settlement Big Tobacco agreed to a decade ago, the state has collected more than \$2.5 billion.

Again, why isn't some of that cash going toward making sure New Jersey has robust tobacco control programs and plenty of aid for smokers who want to quit? Perhaps one unfortunate reason is the fact that in 2002, then-Gov. Jim McGreevey borrowed against future tobacco settlement payments for what was, essentially, a cash advance to help plug a \$5 billion state budget deficit he faced at the time. An addiction to such reckless borrowing was one of McGreevey's (and other recent governors') great flaws.

But back to the point, spending a little bit to educate people about the dangers of tobacco and help smokers quit for good is an investment that can pay back dividends. The state spent an estimated \$120 million last year on smokers' health care costs.

It's simply inconceivable, with all the tobacco revenue Trenton has, that there isn't \$10 million to maintain even modest tobacco control programs in New Jersey.