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California tobacco bills spurred hardball political threats

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Tobacco industry lobbyists threatened to scuttle unrelated ballot initiatives if California lawmakers passed sweeping anti-smoking measures, health advocates said on Friday.

While lawmakers said bills to raise the tobacco-buying age to 21 and to regulate electronic cigarettes as tobacco products drew fierce industry opposition, they characterized the effort as a hard-to-trace background campaign. Assembly Speaker-elect Anthony Rendon, D-Lakewood, last week told reporters lawmakers had received “threats involving electoral efforts.” The bills have yet to move to [Gov. Jerry Brown’s desk](#), California Medical Association chief executive officer Dustin Corcoran said Friday a tobacco industry representative he declined to identify explicitly warned of launching a referendum campaign if the bills passed. Raising the stakes, Corcoran said, they vowed to run the campaign in a way that drew signature-gatherers away from other ballot initiatives and prevented those measures from qualifying.

“They made it perfectly clear that they would seek retribution,” Corcoran said. “The quote to me when they talked to me was ‘we’re going to go scorched earth and we’ll burn everything down.’”

An email obtained by The Bee, dated the day before the Assembly floor vote and bearing the address of a lobbyist for Lang, Hansen, O’Malley, & Miller Governmental Relations, a firm whose clients include Altria,

mirrors Corcoran's description. It details a strategy to torpedo other ballot measures by cornering the market on paid signature-gatherers so that they are unavailable to work for other campaigns.

The message specifically mentions proposed ballot initiatives to extend the Proposition 30 tax on affluent Californians and to impose a \$2-a-pack tax on cigarettes. The latter is supported by a coalition of labor and healthcare groups that includes the California Medical Association.

“When we hit the street with a referendum paying \$10 per signature, Prop 30 is dead as well as \$2 a pack tax,” the email reads. “We will have every signature gatherer on an exclusive. Just letting you know so you can't say you were not warned.”

Lobbyist George Miller, listed as the sender of the email, did not respond to an email requesting comment.

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