

Snuff out the butts or or snuff out your kids

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune

It's been nearly 50 years since the Surgeon General linked cigarette smoking to lung cancer.

Forty years ago, cigarette ads on TV disappeared.

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And the child born when Big Tobacco settled its lawsuits, forfeited billions in profits to the states and curbed advertising geared to youngsters is now attending high school.

Who would have imagined back then - when it was 1964, 1971 or even 1998 - that one of five American teenagers would continue to take up a habit that could eventually sicken and kill them?

And who in his right mind would have thought that politicians today would allow that to continue?

Take Idaho for instance, where one of every seven teenagers will begin a life-long smoking habit.

Can't you just hear the response - that Idaho's 14.5 percent youth smoking rate is better than the nation's 19.5 percent as a whole and lower than 39 other states? It even compares favorably to Wyoming (22 percent), Montana (18.7 percent), Nevada (17 percent) and Oregon (14.9). In Washington, it's 12.7 percent and in Utah, it's 8.5 percent.

Comparisons?

Really?

That's how you avoid watching 1,300 Idaho children begin smoking every year in the Gem State?

That's how you forget the 1,500 Idahoans who die from smoking each year?

The 24,000 kids who will die from smoking-related deaths?

The \$319 million Idaho spends tending to the health effects of smoking?

The \$83 million taxpayers ante up to do the same?

Here's what works: Campaigns that encourage smokers to quit and discourage people from taking it up. Public smoking bans. High cigarette taxes.

Idaho still permits public smoking in bars - although a handful of cities including Moscow and lately Boise, are cracking down.

From \$74 million in tobacco-related revenues, Idaho allocates only \$880,000 encouraging smokers to quit or discouraging them from starting. Ranked 34th, Idaho does more than Washington and Nevada - but far less than Wyoming, Montana, Utah and Oregon. Given Idaho's tough economy, you might excuse using those dollars to plug holes in the rest of state government first.

But at 57 cents a pack, Idaho has the eighth-lowest cigarette taxes in the country - and lower than anywhere else in the West: Washington charges \$3 a pack; Utah and Montana tax cigarettes \$1.70; in Oregon, the tax is \$1.18; Nevada charges 80 cents; and even Wyoming charges 60 cents

While hiking taxes doesn't get many people to quit, it's a smart way to discourage those who are flirting with the addiction. If health concerns don't get their attention, the thought of paying \$5 or \$6 a pack just might. As cigarette prices rose in the late 1990s and early 2000s, youth smoking rates plummeted.

Wouldn't a conservative, anti-smoking state like Idaho get the message?

Earlier this year, House Revenue and Taxation Committee Chairman Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot, proposed boosting Idaho's cigarette tax by \$1.25 a pack. He had the support of Idaho's health care professionals. He also had a no-brainer -stopping kids from smoking and raising more than \$50 million for their schools.

What he lacked was support from his own party.

The GOP sees any tax as a frontal assault on its core principles.

Rather than face certain defeat, Lake did not bring a bill forward. Not so this year. Lake says the coalition behind a cigarette tax increase wants to proceed. As that group's self-described "errand boy," Lake says he will comply.

Don't hold your breath waiting for the anti-tax ideologues to alter course. But win or lose, next year you'll finally learn who in the Idaho Capitol values party orthodoxy above all else. - M.T.