

Editorial: Idaho voters should get chance to lower tuition

Spokesman-Review editorial board

Idahoans fed up with state university and college tuition hikes have an opportunity to cut the bills by as much as 22.7 percent by increasing the state's cigarette tax. There should be more than enough indebted students and parents willing to sign petitions that would put that deal on the 2016 ballot.

Idaho campuses, like others across the country, have raised tuition to punishing levels as legislative support for higher education gave way to other priorities; in Idaho's case, tax cuts. The share of budget spending dedicated to postsecondary education dwindled to 8.6 percent in 2015 from a far-from-robust 13.5 percent in 1994.

In reality, tuition hikes are tax increases on the middle class. The Washington Legislature finally acknowledged the shifting of burden this year and set aside funding that will roll back tuition by as much as 20 percent on some campuses over the next two years.

Tuition in Idaho may be low by comparison with other Western states – only two charge less – but that is not much solace to students graduating with more than \$20,000 in debt and job hunting in a state where compensation remains skimpy. Too many, discouraged by the math, drop out.

A ballot measure filed by a new group, StopTuitionHikes.com, would change the equation by adding \$1.50 to the current 57-cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes. That's a big jump – only Washington's \$3.025 per pack would be higher among its neighbor states – but the group's leader takes heart from a 2010 poll that showed substantial support for tax increases if the revenues were dedicated to improving public health.

William Moran says 10 percent of a projected \$7 million revenue boost would be set aside for fighting tobacco use, but the bulk would flow through to students in the form of tuition reductions. A provision in earlier versions of his proposal that would have capped tuition increases has been set aside in a bid to garner support from university leadership.

He submitted the final version to the attorney general's office on Tuesday for review. If there are no major problems, petitions could start circulating as soon as next month. That's when the real work begins.

StopTuitionHikes.com must collect 47,000 signatures by April, including at least 6 percent in 18 of Idaho's 36 legislative districts. Moran says students and parents from across the state should be able to make that number by adding enough signatures from neighbors to supplement their own John Hancocks.

But legislators who have refused to even hear bills that would increase the tobacco tax will be formidable foes. When teachers rallied voters to overturn the so-called Luna Laws in 2012, the lawmakers retaliated by making Idaho's initiative process nearly unworkable for would-be reformers.

Moran did his homework as he reshaped his proposal. Now, the state should let signature gatherers do theirs. A \$1.50-per-pack tax hike may be an overreach, but the voters should get to make that call.

The unfiltered truth is that too many of Idaho's middle-class families can no longer afford to pay the cost of a college education.