

Santiago loves the sinner, not the 'sin tax'

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Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Think you're paying too much for a pack of Marlboros?

Don't like the cost of a six-pack of Budweiser?

That fifth of Jack Daniels priced just too high?

Then Lewiston has a candidate just for you.

Daniel Santiago is his name.

Reports the Idaho Statesman's Dan Popkey: Santiago is the first Republican to challenge state Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, in eight years. He's a self-described under-funded longshot and acolyte of Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul.

He'd also repeal Idaho's "sin taxes" - those taxes states impose against vices such as tobacco and alcohol.

"Taxes were created for everybody or no one," Santiago said. "Taxes shouldn't be created to punish a certain group, religion or ethnic base. And that's what sin taxes do, they punish a certain group."

That's not a unique view. Smokers are outnumbered by non-smokers, so it stands to reason they'd be outvoted. And a sizeable number of state lawmakers are Mormons who abstain from alcohol and therefore avoid paying taxes on it.

But sin taxes no more discriminate against the people who use those products than fuel taxes impose an unfair burden on motorists. Both are user fees. Smokers get sick from their habit and impose a cost on the public health care system. People who abuse alcohol develop illnesses and cost the public's social welfare and criminal justice systems.

Somebody has to pay for that. Who? The non-smoker and teetotaler?

Besides, it's no cinch to raise any tax in Idaho, even one aimed at a practice held in disrepute.

At 57 cents a pack, Idaho's cigarette tax is the 42nd lowest in the country. It hasn't been changed since 2003. The tax rate on tobacco remains where it was in 1972.

Even a coalition of health care providers, backed by Rep. Dennis Lake, R-Blackfoot, chairman of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, got stalled when they tried to bring Idaho's cigarette tax up by \$1.25.

The tax you pay on beer and wine actually has been declining for years - because it has not been adjusted for inflation. Idaho taxes both based on volume, not price.

Not updated since 1961, Idaho's beer tax has lost 86 percent of its value.

Not touched since 1971, Idaho's wine tax has lost 81 percent of its bite.

Still, when you add it all up - including taxes and profits on Idaho's state liquor store operation - the state rakes in about \$110 million from sin taxes. Losing it would inflict pain on already cash-strapped state and local governments. Replacing it could mean a half-cent increase in the sales tax. Or reversing the \$35.7 million income tax break lawmakers just authorized for high-income families and corporations.

Then what?

Repeal Idaho's 57 cent-per-pack cigarette tax, says the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, and you'll wind up with the following:

- 5,600 more young people taking up the habit.
- 2,100 adult smokers who won't quit.
- Long-term health care costs of \$159 million.

"But that's a side effect of being fair and honest," Santiago told Popkey.

Spoken like a guy who loves the sinner - and the sin. - M.T.