

Tobacco money may help health care

BY GEORGE GREEN

Sen. Jim Jensen of Omaha was a busy man Thursday. He helped engineer a sweeping plan to spend \$50 million of tobacco settlement money on the state's health care system. And he introduced a bill to bump up the tax on cigarettes by 30 cents per pack. Ironically, his bids to improve Nebraskans' health could conflict with each other. Tobacco companies will fork over the \$50 million chunk of change to the state each of the next 25 years. To pay their dues, the tobacco companies need to stay in business. And hikes in the cigarette tax could cut down on the number of

smokers and reduce the producer's income. If enough smokers quit, the tobacco companies could go bankrupt. Jensen said he wasn't worried about the possible paradox. "Anything we can do to stop smoking is a good thing," he said. Moreover, he said, the tobacco settlement is a national issue and the companies' profits are based on consumption nationwide. Therefore, Jensen said, if a few of Nebraska's 393,000 smokers quit, the companies will still turn a profit. "We're in pretty good shape," Jensen said. With this optimism in mind, Jensen lauded the tobacco plan created by a joint session of the

Health and Appropriations committees. The joint committee comprised 16 members who each had ideas about how to spend the money, he said. Add Gov. Mike Johanns to the group, Jensen said, and you have a bunch of different priorities. "For 16 people to come to an agreement is somewhat remarkable," he said. These 16 people cranked out the following plan:
 ■ \$19 million for mental health
 ■ \$10 million for medical research at the prompting of Johanns
 ■ \$8.5 million for public health grants
 ■ \$3 million for developmen-

tal disabilities
 ■ \$1 million for respite care
 ■ \$500,000 for a mental health study
 Sen. Nancy Thompson of Papillion said the bill was a step in the right direction, but she said more needed to be done. "We need to double up everything on here to do it right," she said. Jensen said the bill would go a long way in helping out a struggling health care system. In particular, he said the aid to mental health would increase bed space in hospitals and put an end to a growing problem. "Right now we're in a crisis," he said. The Associated Press contributed to this report.

CFA votes down budget addition

BY JILL ZEMAN

The Committee for Fees Allocation on Thursday voted down the University Program Council's request for an additional \$10,000 to its budget. The request was tabled at Tuesday's meeting because CFA Chairman Brent Stanfield said there were too many unanswered questions in UPC's budget. CFA originally recommended UPC get the same amount in student fees that it did last year - \$121,500. This year, UPC requested \$130,295 in student fees and when CFA voted that down, UPC appealed it. Stanfield said the committee voted 6-3 Thursday to not pass UPC's appeal. Stanfield said the programs UPC planned for next year were similar to what it planned this year, so no additional money was necessary to fund them. "There was no dire need to give them more money for the programs," he said.

"There was no dire need to give them more money for the programs."

Brent Stanfield
CFA Chairman

UPC President Tom St. Germain said his committee would go forward with its plans for the fall semester. In the fall, UPC plans to work on events for Big Red Welcome and Homecoming, he said. The increase in student fees would have gone toward special events, such as when Maya Angelou visited campus last semester. Although his budget was voted down, St. Germain said he didn't think CFA had any negative motives behind the decision. "Of course, as UPC president, I'd love to see more money," he said. "We'll just do the best with what we get."

Legislative Notebook

Bill to keep city walls clean

The Judiciary Committee heard testimony Thursday on a bill making graffiti a crime. Sen. John Hilgert of Omaha introduced the bill, which would broadly define graffiti as any unwanted decorations on objects outside. Under the bill, a person scratching his or her initials onto a rock could be cited for graffiti and receive penalties ranging from a \$500 fine to one year in prison. Omaha senators Kermit Brashear and Ernie Chambers raised questions about the bill's general language.

Bill to boost tobacco tax

Sen. Jim Jensen of Omaha wants to up the tax on cigarettes by 30 cents in the hopes the increase will convince a few of Nebraska's 393,000 smokers to quit. The Revenue Committee heard testimony on LB792, Jensen's bill, Thursday. Overshadowing the testimony was the release of proposal made by Health and Appropriations committees on how to spend Nebraska's chunk of the settlement with tobacco companies. Critics of Jensen's bill

worry that an increase in taxes might force some people to kick the habit and consequently put the tobacco companies out of business. Bankrupt tobacco companies couldn't fork over \$50 million a year to the state, which it owes the state under the settlement. The joint-committee proposal would earmark the \$50 million for mental health, medical research, public health, public health grants, developmental disabilities, respite care and a mental health study.

Nebraskans may enjoy a tax holiday if bill passes

Sen. Patrick Bourne of Omaha wants to give taxpayers a break when they pick out back-to-school items for their kids. His bill, LB498, would suspend the sales tax on certain clothing and footwear items for a limited time to help needy families pay for the necessities. "I want to give Nebraska families a break," Bourne said. Compiled by George Green.



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