

Cigarette tax snuffed out

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS

Gov. Mitch Daniels' proposal to raise the state's cigarette tax 25 cents a pack died in a House committee Wednesday, and a key proponent said it likely won't be revived.

Rep. Tim Brown, R-Crawfordsville, chairman of the House Public Health Committee, said any last-minute efforts to save the legislation this session would be a longshot.

Today is the deadline for bills to

be approved by committee, and inserting a tax increase into another bill later could be difficult because many lawmakers were concerned about the proposal.

Daniels suggested raising the cigarette tax from 55.5 cents per pack to 80.5 cents per pack to help cut down on youth smoking.

The tax increase would have brought in up to \$150 million a year, although Daniels never outlined where that money would go. Some lawmakers were reluctant to vote for a tax increase without knowing how the money would be spent.

Another of Daniels' anti-smoking proposals is still on track.

A bill that would allow companies to offer health insurance discounts for nonsmokers could clear the Senate as early as today.

Officials have said current state law does not permit companies to offer discounts to nonsmokers.

Sen. Beverly Gard, R-Greenfield, said the bill should be an incentive for smokers to quit.

"We have some of the highest health-care costs and health related smoking problems in the country," she said.

House Democrats propose highway plan of their own

By MIKE SMITH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

House Democrats on Wednesday offered an alternative to Gov. Mitch Daniels' proposal to finance major highway projects that they said could raise up to \$2 billion in immediate cash without leasing the Indiana Toll Road to a private venture.

House Minority Leader Patrick Bauer, D-South Bend, said the bonding plan would generate between \$1.6 billion to \$2 billion for major highway and bridge projects by using or tweaking existing funding methods while keeping the 157-mile toll road in northern Indiana completely in the state's hands.

"This (toll road) is really something we, that state government, should not jeopardize, not only for ourselves and this generation but for the next three generations," Bauer said.

Daniels is seeking legislative authority to lease the tollway, and an Australian-Spanish consortium has bid \$3.85 billion in upfront money to lease and operate the highway and receive its future toll



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House Minority Leader
D-South Bend

revenue for the next 75 years. The GOP administration would use the money to pay for numerous highway and other transportation projects it has deemed as priorities.

State Budget Director Chuck Schalliol immediately dismissed the Democrat plan as one that would provide less money for needed projects and add to state government's debt.

"This isn't a plan, this is a joke," Schalliol said.

Democrats have criticized Daniels proposal to lease the toll road on several fronts. They say among other things that the state should not be selling off a major asset to a private venture, especially a foreign one, and that it would be a bad financial deal for

Indiana in the long run.

House Democrats said their plan could raise at least \$1.6 billion, with about half of the money coming from bonds to be paid off over 20 years by using toll road revenue increases the Daniels administration plans to implement beginning this spring. The increases are projected to increase annual revenues from about \$95 million now to \$160 million a year when fully phased in over four years.

The other half of money in the Democrat plan would come from borrowing against future federal highway allocations. That would generate \$800 million to be paid off over 20 years, Bauer said, and the state would keep control of the highway.

Lawmaker withdraws proposal that sparked feud

The Associated Press

INDIANANAPOLIS

At the encouragement of Indiana House Speaker Brian Bosma, a fellow Republican lawmaker withdrew legislation Wednesday that would have prohibited local gay-rights ordinances affecting the housing market and private employment.

Chaos erupted in the House the night before when Rep. Jeff Thompson, R-Lizton, offered the

amendment to an eminent domain bill against Bosma's wishes.

Democrats claimed that it was aimed at ordinances banning discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and said it should be ruled out of order because it had nothing to do with eminent domain.

Some Republicans were miffed over the proposal, too, and business remained stalled for about 30 minutes as GOP lawmakers

huddled privately trying to decide how to proceed. Debate eventually resumed, but after a few lawmakers railed against the measure, Bosma adjourned the session for the evening.

When business resumed Wednesday afternoon, Thompson took the podium and said he was withdrawing the amendment. He said he would not comment about the matter until during the chamber's session Wednesday night.

AT THE STATEHOUSE

Full-day kindergarten clears committee

A contentious education proposal that would use tax credits for students to attend full-day kindergarten programs at either public or private schools cleared a House committee Wednesday.

All the Democrats on the House Education Committee voted against the bill, which passed 6-5. They said the legislation is similar to vouchers because it gives public tax money to private schools.

"It's another step toward dismantling public education," said Rep. Vernon Smith, D-Gary.

The kindergarten bill's sponsor, Rep. Robert Behning, R-Indianapolis, says his proposal would help low-income children attend all-day programs.

Under the bill, students and parents could choose the public or private school they would like to attend for full-day kindergarten. To qualify, students' families would have to fall below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, about

\$39,000 a year for a family of four.

The bill now moves to the full House for consideration, where it will likely face more opposition by Democrats. Republicans hold a slim 52-48 majority in the House.

Also Wednesday, the Education Committee advanced a bill on a 6-5 vote that would make it a crime to bring knives to school with the intent to use them as a weapon.

Bill allowing case workers to carry Mace passed

A bill that would allow case workers to carry Mace or pepper spray cleared a House committee Wednesday largely on lawmakers' concerns that the Department of Child Services might not pay enough attention to its employees' personal safety.

The House Family, Children and Human Affairs Committee unanimously approved the measure, sending it to the House floor, after amending it to take out a provision that would have allowed case workers to also carry stun guns.



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