

Property-tax plan presented

Democrats seek to allow local income tax rates

By Mike Smith
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Indiana House Democrats presented a plan Tuesday that they hope would result in significant property tax relief to homeowners and give local governments more flexibility in raising revenue.

The plan would allow counties to raise local individual income taxes by up to 1 percentage point above the maximum rate and do the same with a new local income tax on corporations. Although there are exceptions for some counties, the combined rate of local option income taxes is capped at 1.25 percent.

New cigarette tax?

Nearly 300 volunteers for the American Cancer Society lobbied lawmakers Tuesday, urging them to pass a \$1 increase in the state cigarette tax.

The American Cancer Society says raising the cigarette tax by \$1 per pack could prevent 89,800 children from becoming smokers and could spur 52,900 people in Indiana to quit.

Gov. Mitch Daniels has asked the General Assembly to raise the cigarette tax by at least 25 cents per pack.

The chair of the House Health Committee, Rep. Charlie Brown, D-Gary, has said he hopes to introduce legisla-

The proposal would freeze property tax levies used to pay for child welfare services at the lesser of 2005, 2006 or 2007 levels and shift future growth in those costs from counties to the state. That would save property taxpayers \$121 million in 2008 and \$141 million the next year, according to House Democrats.

The plan would not affect tax bills this year, when a variety of factors are expected to cause property taxes to increase by a statewide average of 15 percent. But proponents said if all counties went to the maximum rate of local option taxes, the revenue

AT THE STATEHOUSE

tion to raise the state's cigarette tax by at least \$1 per pack.

Next-of-kin bill

Indiana's so-called "next-of-kin law" gives spouses automatic control over funeral arrangements, even if the husband or wife is accused in the death. A proposal approved by a Senate committee Tuesday would give other family members that power if authorities believe a spouse or immediate relative committed certain crimes, including murder, to cause the death.

The Senate's Committee on Corrections, Criminal and Civil Matters unanimously approved the bill, which now goes to the full Senate for consideration.

Keeping livestock away from schools

A bill that would prohibit large livestock farms within two miles around schools, cities and towns drew support Tuesday from residents who said dust and odors from the farms make them ill.

Speakers addressed the House Agriculture and Rural Development Committee to testify on two bills, including one co-authored by Rep. Phillip Plfum, the panel's chairman.

His legislation is one of several before the General Assembly that target the state's growing number of confined feeding operations, farms where thousands of hogs, dairy cows and poultry are raised in tight quarters.

could provide more than \$800 million in property tax relief in 2008.

"I think you will find this bill substantial and lasting," House Speaker Patrick Bauer, D-South Bend, told members of the tax-and-budget-writing House Ways and Means Committee. The panel could vote on the proposal today.

Local governments could still increase property taxes to their maximum allowable levels each year even if they impose the new income tax, meaning bills for some property owners could still go up. But local governments could no longer bank unused property tax levy capacity for the

future, a practice that Bauer says has resulted in some major tax increases in a single year.

The bill also would create control boards in each county that would review and could reject proposed capital projects to be funded through bonds paid off with property taxes.

Although members from both parties have made property tax relief priorities, it likely will take until the end of the session in late April to reach a compromise.

Senate Tax Chairman Luke Kenley, R-Noblesville, has been working on his own plan, and the Indiana Association of Cities and Towns also has its own proposal.

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Online charter schools draw ire of teachers union

The Associated Press

MUNCIE

Ball State University's approval of plans for two online charter schools is drawing opposition over how much state money those schools should receive.

The state's largest teachers union argues that the 2001 law authorizing charter schools did not intend for them to collect a full per-student funding share while providing most classwork over the Internet.

The two online schools granted charters last week by Ball State are Muncie-based Indiana Connections Academy and Indianapolis-based Indiana Virtual Charter School. Both are to begin offering classes this fall and provide high school diplomas by the 2011-12 school year, Ball State officials said.

Students in the two online schools, which Ball State said 14 other states already have, will

receive computers and Internet connections at no charge to their families. Books and other materials will be shipped to their homes.

"It's our feeling that this is kind of a cutting-edge education ... and it certainly is a legitimate form of education," said Larry Gabbert, who heads Ball State's charter school office. "Between computers, cell phones and that so many more things are electronically based, we felt it was time to get on board with this growing trend."

Ball State is the only Indiana university that has used its power to authorize charter academies, which are public schools free from many regulations that cover traditional schools.

Leaders of the Indiana State Teachers Association, however, say Ball State should tap the university's budget, instead of state money for public schools, to pay for the estimated \$20 million it could cost to educate 1,700 online students.



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