

Bid to raise California tobacco tax nears November ballot

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This June 22, 2012 file photo a smoker snuffs out a cigarette at the Capitol in Sacramento, Calif. A well-financed campaign whose backers include billionaire environmentalist Tom Steyer, medical groups and organized labor has collected enough signatures for a ballot measure to raise California's cigarette tax by \$2 per pack, officials said. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli,File)

A well-financed campaign backed by billionaire environmentalist Tom Steyer, medical groups and organized labor has collected enough signatures for a ballot measure to raise California's cigarette tax by \$2 a pack, officials said.

The Save Lives California coalition scheduled a news conference Monday at the San Diego County Registrar of Voters office to submit the first signatures in its effort to triple California's cigarette tax to \$2.87 a pack.

If enough signatures are verified, the measure would appear on an increasingly crowded Nov. 8 ballot alongside proposals to repeal a ban on single-use plastic bags at grocery stores and require actors to use condoms in adult films.

The announcement about the tobacco tax measure came less than a month after Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation to make California the second state in the nation, following Hawaii, to raise the legal age to buy tobacco from 18 to 21. Beginning June 9, it will be a crime to sell or give tobacco to anyone under 21—except military personnel.

The proposed tax increase would also apply to electronic cigarettes and other products with tobacco or nicotine. The measure calls for the proceeds to be spent on Medi-Cal—the state's version of Medicaid—along with anti-smoking campaigns and medical research.

The increase would make California's cigarette tax the ninth-highest in the nation, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, an advocacy group.

New York has the nation's highest tax at \$4.35 a pack and Virginia is lowest at 30 cents. Major tobacco-producing states average: 48.5 cents a

pack while other states average \$1.76 a pack in taxes.

The highest combined state-local tax rate is \$6.16 in Chicago, with New York City second at \$5.85 per pack.



In this Dec. 13, 2005 file photo an unidentified man smokes a cigarette in Sacramento, Calif. A well-financed campaign whose backers include billionaire environmentalist Tom Steyer, medical groups and organized labor has collected enough signatures for a ballot measure to raise California's cigarette tax by \$2 per pack, officials said. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli,File)

The weighted average cost for pack of cigarettes is \$5.96 nationwide.

David Sutton, a spokesman for tobacco company Altria Group Inc., said it opposes large targeted tobacco and e-vapor taxes. Altria is reviewing

the California initiative and considering its options, he said.

The American Vaping Association said it would work to defeat the measure but was undecided how much it would spend.

"Public health benefits every time a smoker switches to vaping," said the George Conley, the group's president. "By recklessly campaigning to equate the taxes on deadly cigarettes with smoke-free vapor products, it is clearer than ever that so called 'anti-smoking' activists have officially gone off the rails."

The campaign in California needs 585,407 signatures to qualify the ballot measure to amend the state Constitution. It reported this month that it spent \$2.8 million during the first three months of the year and had more than \$4 million in cash on hand.

Major backers include the California Medical Association, California Association of Hospitals and Health Systems, and the Service Employees International Union. Steyer, a former hedge fund manager, has contributed \$1 million. He has spoken about his late mother's three-pack-a-day smoking habit,

Seven measures have collected enough signatures to qualify for the November ballot in the state, and an eighth—placed by the Legislature—would repeal prohibitions on multilingual instruction in public schools.

The tobacco tax joins four other measures, including a proposal to legalize recreational use of marijuana, that are pending signature verification.

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