

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Les Landon (225) 923-1037
Karen Miller (225) 929-5266, x220

Coalition: Tobacco tax veto irresponsible, indefensible

(Baton Rouge – June 13, 2011) Calling Governor Bobby Jindal’s veto of a tobacco tax renewal irresponsible and indefensible, the Better Choices for a Better Louisiana Coalition today urged lawmakers to stand up to the governor and override the veto.

Saying that the governor’s decision places political ideology above the health of the people and the fiscal stability of the state, the coalition stressed reasons why House Bill 591 by Rep. Harold Ritchie (D-Bogalusa) should stand.

The four-cent tax on a pack of cigarettes has been on the books since 2000, and generates about \$12 million a year, dedicated to providing health care services. The revenue is used to trigger even more money as matches for federal funds.

At just 36 cents per pack, Louisiana already has one of the lowest tobacco taxes in the nation; reducing it by four cents has economists and health care experts scratching their heads about the wisdom of Gov. Jindal’s veto.

“Vetoing this bill is one of the worst choices a leader can possibly make,” said Eddie Ashworth, director of the Louisiana Budget Project and a founding member of the Better Choices for a Better Louisiana Coalition. “It is bad policy for the health of the state, and it is bad fiscal policy to reduce revenues when the state is already facing a budget crisis.”

Louisiana Federation of Teachers President Steve Monaghan, also a founding Coalition member, said the governor’s decision directly contradicts the wishes of the people of the state.

“The people understand that Louisiana has one of the worst health care records in the nation,” Monaghan said, “and they believe that taxing cigarettes is one way to discourage smoking and to help pay for the damage caused by addiction to tobacco.”

Monaghan pointed out that in a recent survey by the LSU Manship School of Mass Communication, 68.2 percent of the people believe that cigarette taxes should actually be increased.

“We understand that Gov. Jindal has drawn a line in the sand with his no new taxes pledge,” Monaghan said. But on one side of this line are cheaper cigarettes, addiction, cancer and death. On the other side is better health. There ought to be no political downside for the governor to allow the extension of this existing tax.”

Ashworth added, “We believe the legislature made a poor choice when it refused to raise cigarette taxes. But turning back the clock to reduce taxes on a dangerous product is even worse. It will both harm the health of our people and create more instability in our budget.

*These organizations are a part of the **Better Choices for a Better Louisiana** coalition.*

AARP Louisiana // Agenda for Children // American Data Corporation // American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, LA // Bayou Interfaith Shared Community Organizing // Caddo Federation of Teachers // Children’s Coalition of Greater Baton Rouge // Children’s Defense Fund // A Community Voice // Connecting the Dots, LLC // EBR Federation of Teachers // Education NOW! // Franklin Industries // Global Green // Greater Baton Rouge AFL-CIO // Interfaith Works // Jefferson Federation of Teachers // Louisiana AFL-CIO // Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations (LANO) // Louisiana Budget Project (LBP) // Louisiana Consumer Healthcare Coalition // Louisiana Delta Service Corps // Louisiana Federation of Teachers // Louisiana NAACP // Louisiana Primary Care Association // Louisiana Progress // National Association of Social Workers Louisiana Chapter // National Alliance on Mental Illness, LA // National Alliance on Mental Illness St. Tammany // New Orleans Outreach // One Voice // PICO Louisiana // Professional Firefighters Association of Louisiana // Puentes New Orleans // Richland Federation of Teachers // SEIU Local 21 Louisiana // Southern Research and Development Corporation // Southwest Louisiana Independence Center, Inc. // St. Martin Federation of Teachers & Support Personnel // Webster Federation of Teachers

Coalition partner Melissa Flournoy, president of Progress Louisiana, urged lawmakers to stand up to the governor.

“The legislature should be commended for their leadership in passing the renewal of the cigarette tax,” Flournoy said. “They should stick to their votes and override a veto.”

Better Choices for a Better Louisiana —a broad coalition of organizations representing more than a half-million people in the state—advocates for a balanced, transparent approach to solving Louisiana’s fiscal crisis rather than relying solely on short-sighted cuts to services needed by working families. The coalition believes the state cannot sustain another deep budget cut before risking serious, long-term damage to the state and its people.