

Jindal's veto sparks outcry

Written by

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BATON ROUGE — Gov. Bobby Jindal sent the wrong message to young people when he vetoed legislation that would have continued a 4-cents tax on a pack of cigarettes, proponents of overriding the veto said Tuesday.

"This is a defining moment, as far as we are concerned," said Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers.

Monaghan said the governor's stand shows "there's obviously a flip-flop in his position. "» In vetoing this, he's saying 'I'm in support of cancer and childhood smoking and the horrible history of this product.'"

He points to an article Jindal wrote as secretary of the Department of Health and Hospitals in which he says smokers and other risk-takers should pay more for their health care and, "One solution is to utilize prospective rather than retributive payments for smokers, e.g, higher taxes or premiums" rather than reducing their care.

Monaghan joined representatives of the American Cancer Society and Progress Louisiana gathered outside the gates of the Governor's Mansion on Tuesday to protest

the governor's veto and went to the Capitol to lobby legislators to vote to override the governor's decision.

"The governor single-handedly lowered the price of cigarettes," said Andrew Muhl, government relations director for the American Cancer Society of Louisiana. "He made them more affordable for young people. He sent a terrible message to our youth.

"The public is on the right side of this issue, and the Legislature is on the right side of this issue," Muhl said. "We're urging the Legislature to override the governor's veto."

"Override the veto," the gathering of about 25 sign-waving people chanted under the shade of trees along Capitol Access Road.

The protest was planned as a rally to urge Jindal to sign the legislation into law, permanently renewing the tax. But the governor issued his veto Monday night, so the rally turned into a protest.

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"We recognize he is against taxes but this is not a new tax," Muhl said. "It generates \$48 million in health care funds at a time when we have a financial crisis and a health care crisis."

The tax generates \$12 million a year but when used for health care, it gets matching federal funds that would bring it to \$48 million a year.

Without the reduction, Louisiana's cigarette tax is the third lowest in the nation at 36 a pack. Neighboring states are much higher.

"Vetoing this bill is one of the worst choices a leader can make," said Eddie Ashworth, director of the Louisiana Budget Project. "It is bad policy for the health of our state, and it is bad fiscal policy to reduce revenues when the state already is facing a budget crisis."

Monaghan said his primary question for Jindal is, "Why? Why would he take this position on this issue when the state needs health care dollars? Why would he push this particular issue?"

He said Jindal "drawing a line in the sand with his no new taxes pledge" puts better health on one side of the line and "cheaper cigarettes, addiction, cancer and death" on the other.

After receiving official notice of the veto Tuesday, Speaker of the House Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown, surveyed House members on their intentions when Rep. Harold Ritchie, D-Bogalusa, brings up the issue of

overriding the governor's decision.

House members who favor renewing the tax say their side is close to getting the necessary two-thirds vote. But when the bill originally passed without a vote to spare, it's hard to hold on to that supermajority when it requires going against the governor.

Since the latest state constitution was enacted in 1974, the Legislature has overridden vetoes twice. In 1980, an anti-abortion bill vetoed by Gov. Buddy Roemer was overridden, and in 1993, lawmakers overrode a Gov. Edwin Edwards veto of a bill affecting the attorney general's office.

Roemer fought against his override, but Edwards said he only vetoed the bill because Attorney General Richard Ieyoub asked him to do it.

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