

Teen Smoking

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Skeptics have long questioned North Carolina's commitment to fighting teen smoking. Now they have fresh ammunition. The Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission's decision to divert nearly \$6 million from the state's anemic antismoking campaign to a prescription-drug program demonstrates that lack of commitment.

Antismoking advocates have questioned the state's commitment to fighting youth smoking since the settlement of litigation against the big tobacco companies. While most states use the annual payments from that settlement to pay for health care and anti-smoking programs, North Carolina has directed at least half to economic development. There is justification in that decision given that the settlement, and the hoped for reduction in American smoking, will harm tobacco-dependent communities in the state.

North Carolina set aside 25 percent of the funds for the health trust fund, and its first big splash came with the announcement of a prescription-drug program for low-income seniors. Only a small piece of the fund was initially set aside to fight youth smoking. When critics howled, trust-fund leaders said that, eventually, there would be a vigorous anti-smoking campaign. That was supposed to be next year. But the redirected \$6 million will make sure that doesn't happen.

To criticize the trust fund's diversion of the antismoking money is not to criticize the prescription-drug plan. It is a good program. If trust-fund leaders do not have the stomach to take on the state's tobacco interests, they at least have the brains to redistribute this money to a worthy cause. It gives them a defensible out, and a natural constituency for the shift.

The trust-fund leaders are not the only people unwilling to upset the tobacco companies, however. The state Senate has passed a 35-cent-a-pack cigarette tax increase that will be reduced by the House, if passed there at all. If consumers are going to be hit with another tax, then it should at least be large enough to discourage teens from smoking. The 35-cent tax increase that the Senate proposes will not accomplish that mission. It will just take more money out of the pockets of consumers.

North Carolina was built, in large part, on the tobacco industry, and many here continue to depend on it for employment. That does not relieve the leaders of this state, however, from their moral duty to educate youngsters about the dangers of smoking, and to encourage them not to smoke.

The trust fund has found a way to shirk that responsibility. Up next: The state House, which will certainly find similarly justifiable reasons for failing to protect children from the dangers of smoking.