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Board of Health supports higher cigarette tax

By Rebekah Sanderlin

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Members of the Cumberland County Board of Health voted Tuesday to send a resolution to the state House asking for a higher tax on cigarettes. The resolution does not encourage passage of a specific bill, though it does encourage raising the cigarette tax. "Raising the tax might keep children from smoking, and it will also put money in the state coffers," board Chairman Eleanor McGinnis said. The board also decided to return to the state \$600 in grant money that was left over after a \$14,300 security system was installed in the E. Newton Smith Public Health Center. In other business, McGinnis told board members that Wayne Raynor would begin work June 2 as Cumberland County health director. Raynor, the health director for Harnett County, was selected in April to replace Janet Daly, who resigned in January.

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Revenue Ruse

Tobacco-tax hike died needlessly

When, last month, Common Cause North Carolina teed off on state lawmakers for lining up to block a state Senate suggestion that the tobacco tax be raised to help balance the budget and keep it balanced, we teed off on Common Cause. Well, the organization's conviction that the tax wouldn't clear the House was premature; but it was also dead-on correct. And fair's fair. The idea went nowhere after it left the Senate. And you don't have to follow the money far to get the big picture. House and governor dropped it like a hot rock, for which tobacco interests had already been eternally grateful. The party line (both parties) was that the eleventh-hour decision to extend the state sales-tax increase took the steam out of the effort to get the tobacco tax off the cellar floor. Now, there's a clear case of blowing smoke. It didn't have to be either/or. To the extent that the House was governed by such logic, the logic was lame.

The balance that was achieved by state budget-writers is debatable if not totally bogus. A tax on finished tobacco products could have made the balance - both years of it - legit, while serving the wholly laudable cause of deterring tobacco use, which is bad for the smokers' health and costly for the public and private institutions that insure and treat them. It could also have helped stabilize the state's budget for the long term. Instead, we have an ephemeral balance as the federal deficit and carrying costs on the national debt rise and revenue for state and local services dries up. And the good times that were to have started right about now are still not in evidence. You can't blame every bad thing on one rotten decision. But this was a clear opportunity to put a jack under the budget and discourage smoking, too. And the lawmakers blew it, along with their credibility.