

Spending Tobacco Money

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The Legislature's House and Senate are divided over how much of the settlement money from the tobacco lawsuit to appropriate now and how much to set aside in an endowment. The Senate's balanced approach, which would set aside half in an endowment and spend the rest, is the way to go.

The House, by contrast, is leaning toward throwing all of the \$26.5 million available so far into an endowment. It would make appropriations only from the earnings. While that fiscal conservatism is admirable, it would put too little of the settlement money to work right away for purposes related to the lawsuit itself, such as smoking prevention and cessation programs.

Senate Bill 15 would allocate half the funds to an all-purpose endowment and the other half to a Tobacco Settlement Restricted Account. For the coming fiscal year, it appropriates \$15.5 million from that account to four purposes in the following order of priority:

The largest amount, \$5.5 million, would fund the Children's Health Insurance Program. This is a noble cause, since it would fund health insurance for poor children and would repeal the justly hated "sick tax" (see adjoining editorial).

Another \$4 million would go to tobacco prevention, reduction, cessation and control programs. Atty. Gen. Jan Graham and the various charities involved in cancer, heart and lung diseases have launched a public-relations blitz to persuade lawmakers to plow more funds into smoking prevention programs aimed at teen-agers. It is questionable, however, how much money can be used effectively in these programs. It would be more prudent to test various smoking-prevention strategies and determine their effectiveness before committing more money to them.

Senate Bill 15 would allocate another \$2 million to expand the state's drug courts. There is no smoking connection here unless you buy the absurd notion that tobacco is a "gateway drug" that leads directly to other forms of drug addiction. Nevertheless, drug courts have met with some success in modifying addicts' behavior, so this appropriation would expand a program with a promising track record.

The final \$4 million would go to the University of Utah for research, treatment and educational activities. Presumably, some of this money would make its way to the Huntsman Cancer Institute.

Unfortunately, the Senate plan does not include one idea from the House that was attractive. House Bill 94 would have appropriated \$1.2 million annually for smoking-cessation

medications. Smokers trying to quit could have purchased them from the Health Department with a 5 percent co-pay. Unfortunately, that bill has gone nowhere in the session.

Under the Senate plan, the other half of the settlement money would go to an endowment. The Legislature could appropriate the interest earned for any purpose. Since no one knows what future funds will be available from the tobacco settlement, it makes sense to invest half of them.

The Senate's plan strikes a balance between prudent spending and investing for the future.