

SPENDING THE WINDFALL

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The Leavitt administration has hit on an ingenious strategy for spending the tobacco windfall. By declaring tobacco a gateway drug, the governor can justify lavishing the hoped-for billions from the legally extorted tobacco settlement on a wide spectrum of substance- abuse programs.

Not only is the plan ingenious, but it makes good policy sense.

The governor had to come up with some plan to employ the tobacco settlement funds that would mitigate the harm inflicted on the state Medicaid budget by smoking-related diseases. He also needed a strategy to prevent and treat tobacco addiction.

But in terms of the percentage of people lighting up vs. the total population, there are fewer smokers in Utah than in any other state, and certainly fewer than there are ice-cream eaters and Jell-O salad consumers. So, the governor has proposed broadening the use of the tobacco funds to treat vices beyond just smoking or chewing tobacco.

To justify this, Leavitt lumps smoking with drug and alcohol abuse by branding tobacco a gateway drug, that is, a drug that leads to use of other drugs. He then calls for using a big hunk of the tobacco dollars to fund drug and alcohol courts, DUI enforcement, youth corrections drug treatment, pilot drug programs and smoking prevention in the schools, among others.

His plan also calls for plunking \$10 million into the Huntsman Cancer Institute and setting up a trust fund at the state level to provide on-going revenues for tobacco, alcohol and other drug programs.

The plan is based on some sensible assumptions. It recognizes that the settlement funds are not a sure thing. The stream of dollars coming to the state could decrease drastically as a result of tobacco company bankruptcies, lawsuits by other parties, and decreases in the number of smokers as a result of increased prices, higher taxes and heightened awareness of health hazards. So, the governor proposes that the funds be spent only after they are received, i.e., that they be budgeted in the following year.

Most of his plan looks well thought out, if one ignores a two- page illustration in the center of the printed plan that uses questionable numbers and outrageous assumptions to estimate the impact of tobacco, alcohol and drug abuse on a single dysfunctional family and on Utah taxpayers. It carries the tobacco-as-gateway-drug argument to absurd extremes, tying tobacco use with a drug-dependent family whose six members (a couple and four children) cost taxpayers \$682,900 in a single year.

With this illustration, the governor makes a case for substance- abuse treatment programs backed up by drug courts that can save taxpayers big money in the long term. He may be right about that, but this ham-handed illustration equating smoking with alcoholism and abuse of illegal drugs is offensive, simplistic and incredible.

If Utahns and their legislators can get past the surrealism of these two pages, however, they will find that the governor's plan is both thoughtful and prudent.