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# Initiative for cigarette tax likely to be on the ballot

**By Howard Fischer**

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PHOENIX — Arizona voters will likely get to decide whether to sharply boost the tax on cigarettes to fund programs for early childhood development.

Backers of an initiative drive filed more than 206,000 signatures Wednesday to put a measure on the November ballot to boost the levy by 80 cents a pack.

That should provide them sufficient cushion to meet the legal requirement of 122,612 names after screening for invalid names and unregistered signers.

Campaign organizer Nadine Basha said the estimated \$150 million a year that would be raised would be divided up among communities around the state to use on programs that each area considers priorities, such as health screenings, parent education or subsidized high-quality child care.

Basha, a longtime education activist, acknowledged that the decision on how to finance these programs was strictly political. "We polled on everything," she said. "This was the thing that would be the most successful in Arizona."

Basha conceded the link between smoking and early childhood education is tenuous, but said, "There is a connection between children and secondary smoke." This measure could reduce childhood exposure to secondary smoke, Basha added, if the higher tax convinces fewer people to smoke.

If it's approved, the state tax on a pack of cigarettes would hit \$1.98 a pack. And it could reach an even \$2: An unrelated initiative to ban smoking in public places includes a 2-cent-a-pack levy to fund enforcement.

One curious element of the measure is that if Basha is successful, it actually would mean less money for the programs she wants to finance. That's because more people quitting means fewer cigarettes sold and lower tax revenues.

Basha said, though, that the net growth in state population, both native and migrating from elsewhere, should keep revenues relatively stable for a while. "We believe we have a 10-year window," she said.

She said that decade will "prove to the citizens of Arizona these are successful types of programs." At that point, she said, either the Legislature or the voters will have to decide whether to keep financing them.

Basha, who has a master's degree in early childhood education and has served on the state Board of Education, said the initiative is based on the premise that programs for the youngest of children provide the most benefit.

Under the proposal, a new state board would form regional councils, each of which would determine the needs in their own communities and then review applications by public and private organizations for funding to fill those needs.

Basha, who with husband Eddie Basha owns the chain of Food City and Bashas' supermarkets, said that could be quality child care for working parents. But it also might be providing more health screenings for infants, educating parents about early childhood formation and teaching pediatricians to recognize developmental problems in children.

She said the programs will be audited annually to ensure that money is spent as promised, with a cap of 10 percent on administrative costs.

Campaign aides say the effort has so far raised about \$2.2 million, with promises for another \$300,000.

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