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For More Information
Contact: Randy Hayden
225-937-2841 (C)
225-763-8988 (O)
Randy@ccilouisiana.com

LOUISIANA VOTERS MAKE MESSAGE CLEAR: RAISE TOBACCO TAXES BY \$1.25

A new poll shows Louisiana voters of all party affiliations strongly support raising the state's cigarette tax by \$1.25 a pack as a smart solution to closing the state's serious budget shortfall, while saving lives and health care dollars. The poll also finds that 75 percent of voters are more likely to support a candidate who supports a tobacco tax increase.

"As Louisiana legislators address the state's dire \$1.6 billion budget deficit, these poll findings show that voters have a rather clear message for them: fix the budget, raise tobacco taxes – and raise them by a lot," said T. Bradley Keith, director of Invest in a Healthy Louisiana, a coalition of health organizations.

When asked about potential ways the Legislature could address the state's budget crisis – including spending cuts to Medicaid, higher education, road improvements and the Department of Children and Family Services, as well as hikes in the state's income, sales or property taxes -- the results were clear. Voters were intensely opposed to most of them, except for one: increasing the state's tobacco tax.

More than seven out of 10 voters (71 percent) favor increasing the tobacco tax to address the budget shortfall, with a majority (56 percent) "strongly" favoring it. In fact, of all the tax increases presented to the voters polled, it (along with an alcohol tax) was the one that had the least opposition, with even 61 percent of smokers favoring a higher tax on cigarettes.

Experts estimate that an additional \$1.25 increase in the state's tobacco tax would save more than 16,000 Louisianians from premature deaths from smoking and keep more than 23,000 kids from ever starting to smoke.

Other key findings from the poll include:

- *Voters (73 percent) overwhelmingly support a tobacco tax increase of an additional \$1.25 per pack - well above the currently proposed 22-cent increase, which will offer little relief in the \$1.6 billion deficit. Health experts have already derided this miniscule increase as being too low to have any serious health benefits because tobacco companies can easily absorb small increases like this.*
- *Support for an additional \$1.25 cigarette tax is popular across party lines, with 72 percent of Republicans, 68 percent of Independents and 77 percent of Democrats favoring a \$1.25-per-pack increase.*
- *75 percent of voters favor increasing the tax on non-cigarette tobacco products.*

A cigarette tax of \$1.25 alone is projected to raise over \$200 million a year for Louisiana. Raising the tax higher on cigarettes and other tobacco-related products will bring in additional revenue, while also providing income immediately after it is enacted and creating a reliable source of long-term income. Of all the state's recent attempts to raise more revenue, the 50-cent cigarette tax passed last session was the only one that lived up to predictions, according to the Louisiana Budget Project.

Across all party lines, the poll found that a majority of voters would support candidates who voted for a \$1.25 tobacco tax increase, including 64 percent of Republicans, 80 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of Independents.

"It's time for the Legislature to do what Louisiana voters want and get real about solving this budget crisis. A \$1.25 tobacco tax increase, which Louisianians overwhelmingly favor in spite of false political rhetoric, will help do that," said Coalition team member Claudia Rodas, Southern Region Director of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids. "Smoking costs every Louisiana family \$2,400 in taxes a year. If we lower the number of smokers in the state, we lower costs now and in the future. More importantly, we'll save lives. Raising the tobacco tax is the sensible, fiscally responsible, effective and morally right thing to do. It is not often elected officials get handed a win-win solution like this. They need to take it."

The poll, conducted by nationally renowned Public Opinion Strategies of Virginia and paid for by the coalition, was conducted Jan. 28-31 of 500 registered Louisiana voters. Almost 100 percent of those polled (97 percent) said the state budget deficit is a serious issue, with 83 percent calling it "very serious."

The Invest in a Healthy Louisiana coalition consists of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Heart Association, American Lung Association in Louisiana, Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, the Louisiana Campaign for Tobacco-Free Living and other health advocacy groups. This effort is funded in part by The Rapides Foundation.