

Smart health-care legislation is a breath of fresh air

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I like to think that I am second to none when it comes to poking jest at our Legislature. To steal a line from Hollywood writer Larry Gelbart, this do-nothing group wouldn't sign its own stay of execution.

Then along comes a really smart, truly bipartisan bit of legislation, and wow.

House Bill 3500 is legislation done right.

The bill, being pushed by Salem Republican Billy Dalto, among others, seeks to raise Oregon's cigarette tax and to dedicate the proceeds to health insurance and anti-smoking efforts.

Here are some of its merits.

- This bill would fully fund insurance for the 106,000 children currently not covered. OK. There. Knowing that alone, this is a good bill.

Once upon a time, the Oregon Health Plan took care of many of these kids. That changed after the crushing recession of 2002-03 and the aching recovery of 2004. Now we have 106,000 children in this state with no insurance coverage. That's shocking. And this bill addresses the problem straight up.

"Targeting the health-care needs of 100,000-plus kids is a smart idea," said Tina Kotek, policy director for Children First for Oregon. "Children are cheap to cover, and the long-term benefits of such an investment are obvious — healthy kids learn better and are more likely to grow up to be successful adults."

- The bill would pick up insurance for 25,000 people dropped from the Oregon Health Plan during the downturn, including single adults and childless couples living under the federal poverty level. And it would bolster insurance for about 200,000 others.



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This is the proverbial no-brainer. Everyone knows that the more people who have insurance, the less the cost for insurance for the rest of us. We pick up the tab for those too poor for coverage, who use emergency rooms as general practitioners. This bill would save money in your pocket.

- The bill would focus some of the revenue on anti-smoking efforts. The Oregon Legislature in years past has highjacked much or all of the anti-smoking money. This bill changes that.

Mind you, HB 3500 doesn't put enough money into smoking prevention. About 6 percent of the proceeds would go to stop-smoking efforts. I'd bump that up.

Still, that's a quibble. Damiana Merryweather, co-chairwoman of the Human Services Coalition of Oregon, called the bill ambitious and said she's pleased to see someone actually focus on Oregon's health-care crisis.

- The bill is good because it's bipartisan and draws on some of the smartest lawmakers in both chambers: Dalto is joined by Rep. Mitch Greenlick, D-Portland, and Sens. Alan Bates, D-Ashland, and Ben Westlund, R-Tumalo.

- Finally, these lawmakers aren't asking to raise this cigarette tax. They want to ask the Oregon voters in the November 2006 general election. Oregonians are not crazy about tax increases, true, but far more of them are nonsmokers than smokers, and they understand that something like 43 percent of people on the Oregon Health Plan are smokers. Smokers have increased health risks. Getting them to quit is another money-saver.

I get the point of view that Oregonians are overtaxed. I get the view that smokers already pay more than their fair share. Valid arguments, both. That's why making this a voice of the people is so smart.

Will the House leadership allow HB 3500 to get a floor vote? I hope so. I think it'll sail through both chambers, and will be seen by an electorate — who perceives this as a do-nothing Legislature — as good, solid law-crafting.

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