

Don't let industry be only voice on tobacco use

EDITORIAL — The war between big tobacco and public health agencies is unfortunately won or lost largely on who is willing to put money behind their message, and for too long we've been getting smoked.

It's been four years since the Legislature agreed to a significant tax increase on cigarettes and two since it scoffed at Gov. Deval Patrick's proposals to put smokeless tobacco taxes on par with butts and stogies.

House Speaker Robert DeLeo in that time has been firm in his assessment that a recession is the wrong time to be considering any kind of tax hike. Tobacco companies haven't been so parsimonious.

While we were gutting smoking cessation programs, they were pouring billions of dollars into new marketing campaigns.

What's worse is that a growing portion of that money was lavished on smokeless tobacco products, which seem tailor-made for children, with candy flavors and hip packaging. On those products alone, tobacco doubled its marketing budget between 2005 and 2008, according to a recent report by the American Cancer Society.

Patrick recently made it clear he's not giving up. The governor said he will soon ask the Legislature to pass a 50-cent-per-pack hike on cigarettes and propose a doubling of taxes on smokeless tobacco products and cigars, which turn out to be another favorite of young smokers. A report from the state Department of Public Health found that while cigarette smoking is down among teenagers, flavored cigars and smokeless tobacco sales are up.

Critics may be right in saying this is a tax increase many people cannot afford. But consider the cost of the status quo. The state Department of Public Health figures the economic cost of smoking in Massachusetts to be \$6 billion annually.

Massachusetts once ranked first in the nation in funding tobacco-prevention programs, Dr. Lynda Young recently noted in a column on these pages. Now the state is 37th out of 50. On such programs, it spends 0.5 percent of the estimated \$821 million in tobacco-generated revenue it collects each year from taxes and from the 1998 landmark settlement with tobacco companies.

Tobacco companies are spending billions to keep their lucrative and deadly gravy train belching smoke, and it clearly benefits them if the only tobacco message received by impressionable youths is from their mammoth PR machines.

This isn't so much a battle over the wisdom of a tax hike in a still-anemic economic recovery as it is about adding an impediment to lifelong habits that kill millions of people and cost us billions in public health dollars.