

Editorial: Democrats choose tobacco money over public health

By the Editorial Board

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Democratic political consultant Garry South, hardly a starry-eyed idealist, offered an assessment for why Democrats in Sacramento are taking campaign donations from the tobacco industry. It is, he said, “simply baffling.”

“We don’t grow tobacco here, so there are no farmers to protect. There are no cigarette factories here, so there are no jobs or workers to protect,” he told The Bee’s Laurel Rosenhall. “So what exactly are the interests in California that politicians can protect?”

Former Speaker John A. Pérez, who recently lost his run for state controller and must leave the Assembly because of term limits, took the most during the period Rosenhall analyzed, \$95,600, followed by Gov. Jerry Brown, at \$55,000.

Perhaps the switch is not all that baffling. Democrats’ acceptance of tobacco money comes as some of their consultants believe voters are less interested in the issue. Democrats took tobacco industry money as lawmakers killed numerous anti-tobacco bills, including one to ban smoking in apartments. Lawmakers also have failed to seriously regulate e-cigarettes and vaping.

And why? California’s smoking rate is second lowest in the nation after Utah. It’s not as if smokers would swing many elections.

California, supposedly a high-tax state, charges a tobacco tax that is 33rd lowest among the 50 states. Arizona and Texas, which have reputations for being low-tax states, charge higher tobacco taxes than California.

Public health experts say a tobacco tax hike would be the best way to dissuade the next generation from taking up smoking, a step that would save lives and avoid the high cost of medical care incurred by lifelong smokers.

Rosenhall quoted Pérez’s political consultant as explaining Pérez’s decision to take tobacco money by saying: “He’s taking their money and using it against them to (win) the supermajority and get good Democrats elected.”

That truly is a baffling answer. Of the \$95,600 Pérez accepted, \$60,000 flowed into his ballot measure campaign committee, and \$9,300 into a committee he established on the chance he runs for lieutenant governor. So more than two-thirds of the tobacco money Pérez took had nothing to do with helping any Democrat other than himself.

Pérez’s replacement as speaker, Toni Atkins, has not accepted tobacco industry money. Incoming Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León, like current Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, also refuses tobacco money.

It might be too much to ask that lawmakers consider additional tobacco regulation, and an increased tax in the final four weeks of the legislative session.

But when they return in 2015, Atkins, de León and Brown, assuming he wins re-election, should renew efforts to regulate e-cigarettes and perhaps prohibit smoking in apartments where secondhand smoke wafts into neighbors’ spaces. And they ought to raise the tobacco tax, which could stop teens from starting to smoke. If they fail to act, that would indeed be baffling.