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State cigarette tax, water among issues for Oconee delegation

By Ray Chandler

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WALHALLA — Increasing the state cigarette tax will likely be one of the issues the legislature will fast track, according to an Upstate legislator.

The push will likely come by way of a special order that will bring the oft-discussed issue to the legislative forefront, state Sen. Thomas Alexander said Monday. Alexander is a Republican from Walhalla.

Bills to raise the tax had been passed in various forms before by the legislature, once to face Gov. Mark Sanford's veto, Alexander said, but he is confident an increase will succeed in the coming legislative session.

An increase in the tax, at 7 cents per pack the lowest in the nation, has been a hot item in recent legislative sessions, the measure usually described as a means of deterring smoking and raising revenue for health-care costs.

The proposed tax increase was one among many issues discussed Monday evening at a forum at the Westminster Depot attended by the legislative delegation representing Oconee County: Alexander, state Rep. Bill Whitmire, R-Walhalla, state Rep. Bill Sandifer, R-Seneca, and state Rep. Don Bowen, R-Anderson.

Twenty-six county residents and local officials gathered for the hour-long program.

Alexander's pronouncement on the cigarette tax came after the issue was opened by Ben Turetzky of Salem, who advocated an increase of at least 50 cents per pack as a way to stem some of the state's budget woes.

Turetzky also suggested the sales tax cap on automobile sales be removed. The $300 limit on automobiles, whether they cost $30,000 or $50,000, when the state needs revenue makes no sense, he said.

Turetzky, executive director of the Friends of Lake Keowee Society, also asked the delegation to push for a state water management plan to put South Carolina on an equal footing with neighboring states with whom it has to deal, particularly involving removal of water from area lakes.

Bowen said getting a state management structure in place was a priority this session, especially in view of a court decision last year that will block Atlanta from using Lake Lanier, in northern Georgia, as a water supply.

"We need to get a plan in place before Atlanta comes knocking on our door," Bowen said.

Replying to complaints regarding the operation of the State Employment Security Commission, Sandifer said pending legislation would restructure the ESC, eliminating the role of the commissioners and shifting more of their functions to the administrative law courts. The restructuring will also change the way the employment taxes that fund the agency are collected and used.

The agency, which oversees unemployment benefits, needs to be streamlined in its operation, Sandifer said.

Sandifer said one challenge the legislature faced was preparations for the state to begin paying back the $700 million loan from the federal government last year that enabled the ESC to continue paying benefits after its own funds were exhausted.

"Every state except about three have that challenge," he said.



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