

Tough sell for tobacco tax on California ballot

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

In the past decade, red and blue states alike, from Mississippi to New York, have approved more than 100 tobacco tax hikes in a desperate hunt for budget revenue.



But not one has passed in California, whose 87-cent cigarette tax dropped from third-highest in the nation in 1999 to 33rd today despite the state's ongoing budget woes.

That confounds health advocates, who otherwise consider California to be a trailblazer when it comes to bans on smoking in bars and restaurants, and public campaigns urging tobacco users to quit.

But longtime state budget watchers are hardly surprised. They largely blame the state's supermajority requirement to pass tax hikes in the Legislature. That forces tobacco tax votes to the ballot, where industry can spend unlimited sums of money.

"Certainly the state has been looking in every place possible for new sources of revenues," said Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California. "Most other places have a simple majority, and I think a two-thirds majority is a hurdle even for something seemingly as popular as a tobacco tax."

The June ballot has a tobacco tax hike, Proposition 29, that would raise \$735 million in its first full year, mostly for cancer and disease research. The Legislature could not tap the funds for 15 years, and even then not without meeting certain

requirements.

Read the whole story