



A PAIN IN THE BUTTS

Mike's 50¢ cig hike

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ALBANY — Smokers, beware.

Mayor Bloomberg is ready to give you another butt-kicking by hiking the city tax on cigarettes.

Bloomberg told reporters yesterday he would like to boost cigarette taxes by 50 cents a pack in the city, which would raise the overall city tax to \$2 a pack on top of the \$1.50 state tax.

A Bloomberg aide said a final number has not been decided upon, but the mayor is set to include the call for a higher tax in his State of the City address on Thursday.

"Here's our chance to save lives, particularly among our children who perhaps don't know how dangerous smoking can be," the mayor said.

Smokers were incredulous, calling it "another assault on one quarter of the population."

Currently, with all taxes factored in, a pack of cigarettes in the city goes for an average of \$7 to \$7.50. The city in 2002 raised its cigarette tax to \$1.50, up from just 8 cents a pack.

"The attempt by government to change legal behavior that they disapprove of by theft is un-American, un-Republican — and this from a man who said no new taxes this year," said Audrey Silk, of the city-based pro-smoking group NYC CLASH.

Bloomberg said he would use any extra revenue to help fund smoking-cessation and education programs.

He argued that since the last increase four years ago, there are 200,000 fewer smokers and believes an-



other increase would further keep teens from trying cigarettes. The mayor said he opposes Gov. Pataki's plan to increase the state sales tax on cigarettes by \$1 while subsequently lowering the current \$1.50 city tax by \$1.

Pataki's plan would then reimburse the city the \$78 million it would lose from the change.

"If we make any change at all in the cigarette tax this year, we must raise the tax that the city can collect on cigarettes, which would provide the city with additional revenues to spend on new public-health efforts to prevent and stop smoking," he told lawmakers.

Lawmaker reaction was mixed.

Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, who is anti-smoking, has insisted he does not want to raise any taxes this year and has been cool to the governor's plan to raise the state cigarette tax.

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