



PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

February 4, 2003

Contact: Katherine Donald at (501) 687-0345 or Cell Ph. (501) 912-4668

TOBACCO FREE ARKANSAS POLL FINDS STATEWIDE SUPPORT FOR TOBACCO TAX INCREASE “Increase Would Boost Revenue, Increase Public Health”

Little Rock – According to a poll commissioned by the Coalition for Tobacco Free Arkansas (CTFA), nearly two-thirds of Arkansas voters favor an increase in the state tax on tobacco products. Results from the poll show that 65 percent of Arkansas voters either strongly favor (56%) or somewhat favor (9%) such an increase.

“While most tax increases are hard sells, this poll shows that Arkansans approve of increasing the tax on tobacco,” said Barbara Kumpe, CTFA Chair and Advocacy Director for the American Heart Association. “In light of a growing state budget deficit, increasing the tobacco tax is both good for state revenues and good for the health of Arkansas’ Kumpe pointed to figures that show a 30 percent increase in Arkansas’ sales tax on tobacco products would generate \$229.2 million annually in new revenue.

Dr. Gary Wheeler, a CTFA Board member and representative of the Arkansas Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics highlighted an additional benefit of raising the tobacco tax. “Other states that have raised the tobacco tax have seen a marked decrease in tobacco usage, especially among our children. If Arkansas raised its tobacco tax by 30 percent, we project a 21% decline in youth smoking. Simply put, when the price of tobacco goes up, fewer children smoke. That’s good for Arkansas.”

Arkansas currently levies a state tax amounting to \$.34 cents per pack of cigarettes. That figure places Arkansas 32nd in the nation (50 being the lowest tax rate), and well below the national average of \$.62 cents per pack. In 2002, twenty states raised tobacco taxes.

“Unlike most taxes, tobacco taxes are self-imposed. If you don’t use tobacco and negatively impact the health of yourself and those around you, you won’t be taxed,” said Kumpe. “We believe, and our poll shows that Arkansans believe, that increasing tobacco taxes is a fair way to increase state revenue.”

Dr. Wheeler suggested Arkansas’ current low tobacco tax puts an unfair burden on the nearly 75 percent of the Arkansas population that doesn’t smoke. “In Medicaid dollars alone, the state of Arkansas spends \$189 million per year to treat tobacco-caused diseases,” said Dr. Wheeler. “Only \$85 million is collected in tobacco taxes and non-tobacco users are making up the difference in their tax dollars. It’s time we raise the tobacco tax to reflect the real costs of tobacco. Tobacco use is robbing us of our loved ones and bankrupting Arkansas’ healthcare system.”

Other highlights of the poll include support for using tobacco tax revenues to pay for Medicaid insurance (43 percent favored) and public education (41 percent favored). State Representatives and Senators can feel comfortable voting for increased tobacco taxes. Thirty-six percent of poll respondents say they would be much more likely or somewhat more likely to vote for a candidate who increased the tobacco tax. Forty-one percent of voters said such a vote would make no difference in their vote during the next election.

The poll was conducted by Ernie Oakleaf of Opinion Research Associates, Inc of Little Rock. The statewide, random telephone survey of 603 registered Arkansas voters was conducted January 22-29, 2003 and has a margin of error of ± 4.1 percentage points.

###