

# PalmBeachPost

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Make all cigarette makers pay for smokers' care

By: Jose Gonzalez

The new year brings a time for self-reflection and change. Many Floridians have adopted resolutions that involve eating better, exercising or altering behaviors that can be harmful to their health. As we launch 2010 and prepare for the legislative session in March, it's also a good time for Florida to reflect on its overall economic health and the health of its citizenry.

Our state is facing another multibillion-dollar budget shortfall, which means less money to pay for such critical services as health care. As Florida's population ages and demand for health care grows, it's imperative that we look for ways to bolster revenue earmarked for health care.

Florida's landmark Tobacco Settlement Agreement required smokers who purchased products made by the tobacco manufacturers that signed the agreement to pay an extra 40 cents per pack of cigarettes. That money goes to help defray the state's smoking-related health care costs. Yet 20 percent of the cigarettes sold in Florida are made by companies that didn't sign the settlement and whose customers do not contribute toward the state's health care costs.

This week, Associated Industries of Florida released the results of a poll revealing that almost two-thirds of Florida voters believe that a fee should be imposed on cigarette manufacturers that didn't sign the agreement and aren't paying the state. Health care is expensive. It's time that everyone pays his or her fair share, regardless of the brand they smoke.

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Editor's note: Jose L. Gonzalez is vice president of governmental affairs for Associated Industries of Florida.