

# New cigarette tax has smokers fuming

By [Kameel Stanley](#), St. Pete Times Staff Writer

In Print: Wednesday, July 1, 2009

Eva Roberts spent four weeks trying to prepare her customers for this day.

She posted signs. She made sure price lists were available.

Still, on Tuesday, Roberts and her employees spent a busy day dealing with people who were confused, upset and frustrated about what was to come.

Starting today, the price of cigarettes in Florida will go up again, thanks to a \$1 increase in the state tobacco tax.

"I never thought it would get like this," said Roberts, manager at Smoke Cheap/Metro PCS in St. Petersburg. "For the people that live here, it's a big shock wave."

Several people flooded smoke shops and convenience stores throughout Tampa Bay on Tuesday, trying to stock up on cigarettes before the price jump.

The tax hike, passed during this year's session as one of the many ways to balance the budget, is significant.

For years, Florida had one of the lowest state cigarette taxes, 34 cents a pack. Today's increase brings the total to \$1.34 per pack.

What's more, this latest hike comes on the heels of a similar one implemented April 1, when the federal cigarette tax went up 62 cents a pack. Wholesale prices of other tobacco products, excluding cigars, will go from being taxed 25 percent to 60 percent under the new law.

"I think its outrageous," said Roberts, who admitted that she recently switched from a premium to generic brand of cigarettes because of the expense.

The tax has divided people into two camps: those who think it will help and those who think it will hurt.

Advocates say the hike will not only provide revenue for the state in the short term, but save on health care costs in the long term because of people who will stop smoking.

Critics, however, say the hike is too steep, too soon and could ultimately end up having a negative effect on local businesses.

"This will have a big impact, and I don't think the politicians understand the business aspects," said Fred Hoyland, owner of 17 Tobacco Depot stores throughout the bay area.

Hoyland pointed to last week's announcement that the Hav-A-Tampa cigar factory in Tampa will close, eliminating almost 500 jobs. The company blamed the federal tax increase as a reason for its decision.

But health advocates say the benefits of the hike outweigh any potential harm.

"We're very pleased," said Peter Fisher, vice president of state issues for the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids. "It's a win win win for Florida."

The tax is expected to raise more than \$900 million a year for health care, officials said.

Rena Greenberg, president of Wellness Seminars, said she's already seeing changes.

Greenberg has been running smoking cessation classes using hypnosis since 1990.

She said her most recent class, held Saturday at Helen Ellis Memorial Hospital in Tarpon Springs, was full, with about 35 people.

"It's tough for people right now financially," she said. "For many people, it is just the push they need, even if they resent it."

Times staff writers Amy Mariani and Victoria Bekiempis contributed to this report. Kameel Stanley can be reached at (727) 893-8643 or [kstanley@sptimes.com](mailto:kstanley@sptimes.com).

[Last modified: Jun 30, 2009 10:57 PM]