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House Dems pass \$1 a pack tax

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JACKSON -- The state House passed a cigarette-tax increase of \$1 a pack Thursday to help fund Medicaid, with a vote that broke along party lines.

The 74-42 vote pitted Democrats, in favor of the tax increase, and Republicans, who opposed it. The bill, sponsored and presented by Rep. Dirk Dedeaux, D-Sellers, is expected to die in the Senate.

Medicaid is projected to have a \$92 million deficit this budget year. Gov. Haley Barbour has proposed the idea of reinstating a tax on hospitals to help fund the Medicaid deficits instead. Rep. Brandon Jones, D-Pascagoula, told the Sun Herald after the vote the decision was easy.

"When given a choice between taxing hospitals and taxing cigarettes," Jones said, "I'll choose cigarettes every time."

Lawmakers in 2006 and 2007 tried to pass various versions of a cigarette-tax increase coupled with a reduction in taxes on groceries. Barbour vetoed two such bills the Legislature passed in 2006. Former Sen. Tommy Robertson, R-Moss Point, killed a similar bill in 2007 in the Finance Committee he then chaired, despite widespread, bipartisan support for the measure at the time.

Legislative notebook

A glance at some bills passed by Mississippi lawmakers Thursday:

Public meetings: Revise law on the amount of public notice that must be given before a Board of Supervisors special meeting. Under current law, five days' notice must be given. Under House Bill 123, only one day's notice would be required. The bill passed the House and moves to the Senate.

Bait: Allow the hunting of deer over grain placed in a covered feeder on private property. House Bill 1089 passed the House and moves to the Senate.

Elder abuse: Allow stronger penalties for a person found guilty of assaulting a person 65 or older. Senate Bill 2223 passed the Senate and moves to the House.

High school: Allow the state Department of Education to expand the number of sites in a high school redesign pilot program. House Bill 975 passed the House and moves to the Senate.

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