

Plan has many holes

I truly believe our erstwhile elected officials were more concerned about their legacy on this issue of health care than really making a difference in the lives of Californians. I came to this conclusion because, in the end, they failed to do the real heavy lifting, which was to attach a budget to the plan so it could be debated on the Assembly floor.

Instead, Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez, et al, played yet one more shell game approving a plan, all the while ignoring our looming and ever-growing budget deficit.

Meanwhile, they expect the electorate to approve a series of tax increases that they themselves were unwilling to even bring up for a debate. Now that's leadership for you.

As for the plan to pay for this by hiking the cigarette tax, I think the proposed \$1.50 to \$2.00 per pack increase may be a pipe dream if the recent election in Oregon is any reflection of the mood of the electorate.

In early November, Oregon voters sent Measure 50 down to defeat (a modest \$0.85

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per pack increase on cigarettes to expand existing health care programs) by an 18-point margin.

Not to mention that, thanks to a very successful state-supported stop-smoking program, we've made great strides in reducing the numbers of smokers in our fine state. They want to support this plan by taxing a product we have specifically targeted to eliminate if not substantially decrease. What is wrong with this picture?

Personally, I would have much preferred that our legislators delay their promise on health care reform by even a few months in order to deliver us a package of real reform rather than what looks to be nothing more than a plan that has been hobbled together, just so these same legislators can say that they made good on their promise to deliver health care reform by year's end.

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Waiting for the numbers

WHEN a consumer goes

out to make a big purchase, he or she must be ready to pay for the item.

If only California could learn this lesson.

Earlier this week, Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Democratic Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez — and the entire Assembly — approved a plan that offers health insurance to the uninsured at a pricetag of \$14.7 billion.

Unfortunately, California's ambitious health care shopping spree may never deliver the goods to its intended recipients — the uninsured. Heck, it may never reach the state Senate for approval. That's because State Senate Leader Don Perata, D-Oakland, has held up its consideration until the state's top accountant figures out how much this will impact the state budget, which is already gushing red ink.

Ironically, the state budget is suffering from a \$14 billion deficit, about the same amount the new health care plan will cost. Schwarzenegger says the health care plan is "revenue neutral," because it relies on tax increases on cigarettes, employers, and hospitals and will draw in additional federal health care revenues. But Perata — as are we — is skeptical of this claim. He wants a second opinion.

He's asked the independent state legislative analyst's office to

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If indeed, the governor and Nuñez are correct, that the taxes levied will pay for the sweeping health care reform, so be it. But we'd like to see the proof. Too often we've heard the governor and the Legislature say they're balancing the budget, or they're cutting spending, when neither has happened.

So until we learn more about the state's deficit and how *that* gets taken care of, and more about the health care plan and its ramifications, we'll reserve judgment. We await an impartial analysis of both.

review the plan and determine if it will drive the state deeper into a hole.

A wise Assemblyman, Roger Niello, R-Sacramento, put it this way: "The first rule when you find yourself in a hole is, stop digging."

We agree.

Now, we're not saying we're against finding a way for the state to provide health insurance to some 6.6 million Californians. A noble cause. In fact, the governor's health care plan (whose details are still emerging) could actually lower the cost on those already insured because it would mean trips to the hospital's emergency room by the uninsured would be paid by health insurance companies, instead of the bill being left to hospitals and ultimately, taxpayers.

What is crucial, however, is for the state to get its fiscal house in order before decorating it with new accoutrements.

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