Bill to ban smoking at work gains momentum

SACRAMENTO (AP) — A bill to ban smoking in most indoor workplaces is headed for a vote by the full Senate after nearly being snuffed out in committee.

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved the bill Monday, 8-3, after agreeing to remove amendments that the bill's backers said would shatter support for the legislation.

Panel members also approved a bill that would eliminate state tax deductions for business expenses related to tobacco advertising, handing tobacco distributors a second loss in the same day.

The smoking ban, by Assemblyman Terry Friedman, D-Sherman Oaks, stalled last month after the Senate Judiciary Committee added amendments that supporters said would splinter the coalition of health, restaurant, hotel, local government and labor groups backing the bill.

The amendments would have allowed smoking in up to 25 percent of a restaurant that met yet-to-be-developed state ventilation standards and would have barred local governments from enacting tougher new anti-smoking ordinances.

Sen. Art Torres, the Los Angeles Democrat who proposed the restaurant amendment and cast the swing vote on the local ordinance amendment, made the motion to remove both provisions.

Torres is running for state insurance commissioner and has been under fire from one of his chief opponents, Assemblyman Burt Margolin, D-Los Angeles, for his role in amending the bill in the Judiciary Committee.

Friedman, referring to studies about the deadliness of secondhand smoke, said enactment of his bill would mean that "workers would no longer have to choose between their health and their jobs."

But Jesse Navarro, vice president of the International Chamber of Commerce of San Ysidro, claimed the bill would hurt business by driving away international tourists.

"We understand the health issue," he told the committee. "We need to have some flexibility so we can ... cater to all of our customers."

Sen. Gary Hart, D-Santa Barbara, sponsored the tax deduction bill, saying that taxpayers should not be required to subsidize a dangerous product.

But an attorney representing the Tobacco Institute and Smokeless Tobacco Council contended that the bill raised serious free speech questions by attempting to discourage tobacco ads.

Hart asserted that the bill would meet constitutional tests. "This is discouragement; it is not, in my view, censorship," he said.

Friedman said he hadn't decided when he'll ask the full Senate to vote on his bill but said it would be soon.

"I'm increasingly hopeful" of getting the bill to the governor's desk, he said, "but I do not want to discount the power of the tobacco industry, especially at a time their back is against the wall."

He said he wanted to move his bill soon to try to deflate a tobacco industry campaign for a November ballot measure designed to replace local anti-smoking ordinances with a weak state law.

Transportation plans submitted

SEATTLE (AP) — A wish list submitted to the state Transportation Department by some of the world's biggest construction companies is not just pie in the sky: The proposals come with funds to ensure the ideas get serious review.

Among the 14 proposals are a second Tacoma Narrows Bridge in Pierce County, a four-lane highway under Seattle and automated bubble cars near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Each suggestion was accompanied by a $35,000 check — the estimated cost of a state review.

The Legislature came up with the plan last year, authorizing Transportation Secretary Sid Morrison to negotiate with private companies to build transportation-related projects Washington can't yet afford.

The companies would be allowed to charge tolls or other fees to recover construction costs and a reasonable profit. The facilities then would be turned over to the state.

By Friday's application deadline, 11 consortiums, including one co-managed by Ross Perot Jr., submitted 14 proposals totaling about $4.8 billion.

The Perot Group, the company run by the son of former presidential candidate Ross Perot, wants to build a second Narrows Bridge. Competing proposals for that project came from Bechtel Group, the nation's largest construction and engineering company, and Atkinson Construction Co., a California-based firm that has teamed up with a German company with expertise in building suspension bridges.

The Narrows Bridge connecting Tacoma and Gig Harbor is one of the worst traffic bottlenecks in the state. State estimates for building another span range from $300 million to $1 billion.

"Maybe the only way we can do the Narrows Bridge is with a public-private partnership," said Rep. Ruth Fisher, D-Tacoma, chairwoman of the House Transportation Committee. "I don't know.

"The whole philosophy is that we can't raise enough taxes to meet these needs."

Raytheon Co., a $9 billion-a-year technology company, wants to build a system of automated "personal rapid transit" cars that would carry up to four passengers along elevated tracks between Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and area hotels and businesses.

A team of 25 local and international companies calling themselves the Seattle Transportation Group offered a $1.4 billion proposal to demolish Seattle's Alaskan Way Viaduct, replace it with a two-mile tunnel and rebuild Mercer Street between Interstate 5 and Aurora Avenue.

Other proposals include a new floating bridge on Washington 520 across Lake Washington, a $20 million freeway interchange in Dupont, parking garages at park-and-ride lots in Tacoma and Federal Way and widening portions of Washington 18 between Auburn and North Bend.

There's also a proposal from an international consortium called Washington Fast Ferries to build and operate a fleet of six high-speed, 350-passenger foot ferries linking Seattle with Vashon Island, Bremerton, Kingston and Southworth.

Details of the projects were sparse, pending completion of the state review this summer.

Oregon plans to test RU-486 abortion pill

PORTLAND (AP) — Oregon is in line to be one of the sites for tests of the abortion pill RU-486.

The French pharmaceutical company Roussel-Uclaf has agreed to donate its patent rights to the Population Council, the not-for-profit organization in New York that will oversee the national testing.

Rep. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., has been an outspoken proponent of allowing the drug to be marketed in the United States.

None of the 10 to 12 test sites has been named but one will be in Oregon because "we sort of made a commitment to Wyden," Sandra Waldman, a spokeswoman for the Population Council, said Monday.

The name and location of centers where RU-486 will be tested will not be made public because the council is concerned that women would confuse data by going from one clinic to another at the trial sites, and researchers want to protect participants' confidentiality, Waldman said.

Furthermore, financing is not set for the national trial, which will cost "several million dollars," she said. No state or federal money is involved.

Oregon Health Sciences University researchers have applied to participate in the trials, said Dr. Mark D. Nichols, associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology.

For months, the health sciences university research team has anticipated the patent agreement and has been in touch with the Population Council, he said.

Lynda J. Harrington, executive director of Oregon Right to Life, said her organization was opposed to RU-486 testing for abortion but "not for true research purposes where the drug can be used to enhance or save life."