

Tobacco tax money won't be taken away

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Early childhood development programs in San Mateo County will not lose \$15.5 million in funds after state officials decided not to appeal a decision denying them \$1 billion in tobacco taxes they hoped would help with the state's budget deficit.

"This is a victory for our young children and their families," said Debby Armstrong, First 5 San Mateo County executive director, who was thrilled with the decision.

Last year, the state budget included Assembly Bill 99, which required First 5 Commissions throughout the state to send \$1 billion in reserve funds to the state by June 30, 2012. Lawsuits were filed to stop the loss of funding — a request a Fresno judge approved in November. California had until Monday to appeal the decision, which it didn't do.

The welcomed decision will mean additional work for the local commission which last year created a plan to cut 32 percent of its budget in preparation of losing \$15.5 million. During the upcoming months, Armstrong said, the group will revisit the six-year, long-term financial plan to use these funds.

"Recognizing that First 5 revenue continues to decline, we had planned to make reductions starting in July 2012 of approximately 10 percent. AB 99, however accelerated the process and increased the percentage being cut to 25 percent," said Armstrong.

The process was difficult but did bring the community together to prioritize services for children as well as set aside funds for non-direct services such as public education and awareness, systems building and training.

"I would say that while the cuts were difficult, they were inevitable, and the community played a big part in the funding decisions that we made in September 2011," Armstrong said.

Anne Campbell, San Mateo County superintendent who serves on the local First 5 Commission, was also happy to hear the news.

"Now, we'll be able to recapture those funds and use them in support of our new strategic plan which focuses on leveraging community partnerships to increase the impact and quality of programs serving young children and their families in San Mateo County," Campbell said.

First 5 California works to provide educational and health programs for children up to 5 years old. It is funded through a 50 cent per pack tobacco tax passed through 1998's Proposition 10. Through partnerships, First 5 works to offer direct services like expanding child-care services; providing therapists in programs to train teachers to identify and address emotional or behavioral issues; covering health insurance premiums for children ages 0 to 5; and supporting children with special needs.

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