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Gym Shoe Tax Could Fund Aid for Dropouts

Buying a new pair of running shoes in Illinois could cost a quarter more if a measure to tax gym shoes gets traction at the Capitol. The idea behind the 25-cent shoe tax is to pump more money into programs that help high-school dropouts from low-income homes get jobs in the construction trades or get back on track to attend college.

"There are young people everywhere that are looking for a positive outlet that they might not find otherwise," said Rep. Will Davis, a Homewood Democrat who's sponsoring the shoe tax.

Business groups and shoe store owners aren't keen on the idea, suggesting the new tax will hurt the competitiveness of Illinois sneaker sellers.

"They're already crossing the borders for many things," said Kim Clarke Maisch, Illinois' director of the National Federation of Independent Business. "They're crossing the borders for gambling, for example. We don't need any other reasons for them to travel elsewhere."

The shoe tax proposal is the latest example of attempts in Springfield to raise money for specifically targeted programs. There's not much appetite for big tax hikes after Democrats passed what was billed as a temporary 67 percent increase in the income tax rate two years ago. Money remains tight, so lawmakers are looking to create small pots of cash for programs they support.

Last year, state Sen. Toi Hutchinson, an Olympia Fields Democrat now running for Congress, sponsored a pair of such tax hikes. Strip clubs now pay a tax with proceeds going to fund rape crisis centers. And drivers pay \$2 more on license plate fees, with the money going to improve state parks.

Davis said he's picked up on the "creative ways" used last year. He didn't have a specific correlation between shoes and the youth programs, however.

"Athletic shoes are widespread," Davis said. "If you're trying to find an idea that will capture as many resources as possible, this works. Everyone uses them, and just about everybody buys athletic shoes at some point in their lives."

The shoe tax would provide money throughout Illinois for YouthBuild and potentially other similar programs that faced cutbacks in recent years of tight state budgets, Davis said.

There are 16 YouthBuild programs in Illinois. Most students in the programs did not graduate from high school or struggle with reading and writing. Attempts are made to help them get the equivalent of a high school diploma. They often build low-income housing as a way to learn blue-collar skills. [...]

In south suburban Harvey, the YouthBuild program has done work for Habitat for Humanity and emergency response training for handling hazardous waste. The main goal is to help people pursue more prosperous careers through college or apprenticeships, said Kreshina Ingram, the program's manager.

"We're not just looking for them to move up to part-time or temporary positions — or go into fast-food jobs," Ingram said. "We want them to get careers." [...]

As Davis seeks more money for such programs at the Capitol, he might have to tweak his bill as it goes through the legislative process. As written, the bill defines athletic shoes as used "primarily for sports or other forms of physical activity and includes, without limitation, shoes designed for running, walking, basketball, football, tennis or soccer."

That definition may be problematic because it is so broad, said Mandy Rafool, a tax policy expert with the Denver-based National Conference of State Legislatures.

To get the shoe tax through, Davis also will have to overcome opposition from business groups representing shoe store owners.

Dave Zimmer, who is about to open his third Fleet Feet store in Chicago, isn't averse to helping charitable groups. He partners with charities including the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, Access Living, the American Cancer Society and PAWS Chicago, according to the company's website.

But Zimmer said an increase in shoe costs could prompt customers to buy them online at a time when bricks-and-mortar stores are losing business to the Internet.

"I understand what they're trying to accomplish and the good they want to create," Zimmer said. "But I just don't get the correlation between athletic shoes and the programs this tax would fund."

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