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Better late than never

The House Republicans, in the final moments of the North Dakota Legislature, pulled themselves back from the brink of a bottomless chasm of citizen discontent.

After weeks of downplaying the good sense of North Dakota voters, House Republicans relented and fully implemented, with one exception, Initiated Measure 3 that required an anti-smoking executive committee be formed to spend new tobacco settlement money allocated to the state. It was a wise, if belated, choice.

Republicans in the House had set themselves up against House Democrats, Senate Republicans, North Dakota's Republican governor and a majority of the people of the state. Why would they do that?

The stated reason was that Measure 3 represented an unacceptable expansion of government. The Republican Party's historic belief in smaller government would support that position. However, given the growth of state agencies over the past decade, during which the GOP has dominated the Legislature, that rationale comes off as a little shallow.

And then there were the comments that the voters did not really know what they were voting on. Elected lawmakers in a democracy should be wary of insulting voters. The electorate might ask themselves how smart they had been in electing you.

The real reason for House Republican intransigence on Measure 3 is probably something else, perhaps less palatable than mere ideology, such as the reluctance to give up control. Or maybe it was the water money, that one exception in the mix.

Whatever, in the end they saw the light.

Attention should now shift to the anti-smoking executive committee, already appointed by the governor and with \$12.9 million in the bank. They have an incredible challenge before them, to reduce the number of smokers in the state.

The bad news, that smoking isn't good for your health, is old news. The linkage between smoking and cancer isn't a dicey global-warming analogy. Yet, we still have smokers among us. And many of them are young people, new smokers who were exposed to existing anti-smoking education curriculums and health marketing programs that didn't take. All the easy-to-quit smokers have been cherry picked, and those remaining will be hard sells.

But that's the anti-smoking executive committee's task ahead.

It's not clear, politically, where the State Health Department was on the Measure 3 legislative rhubarb. Likely, the agency was in a lose-lose situation politically and, therefore, kept a low profile hoping not to go down with whomever lost. Clearly the agency is unabashedly anti-smoking.

Everyone, on all sides, has one overriding hope: that smokers will also see the light and quit. That North Dakotans as a whole will be healthier. That our health insurance costs will, as the result of fewer smokers, moderate. And that we will all be here to see the light when the smoke clears.