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Murphy proposes big hike in N.J. gun fees as some push to relax firearms laws

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For the third year in a row, Gov. Phil Murphy has proposed big increases to more than a dozen gun fees in New Jersey.

Murphy's push for higher fees in his proposed state budget follows a series of bills he's signed adding new restrictions to gun laws that were already some of the toughest in the nation.

The move also comes as some are pushing back against restrictions, especially after recent attacks like the Jersey City shooting left many feeling vulnerable.

Murphy is asking lawmakers to raise the cost of a \$2 gun application to \$50, and a firearm ID card from \$5 to \$100, according to the state's treasury department.

The Democratic governor also proposed a 2.5% tax on firearms and a 10% tax on ammunition.

Murphy said Tuesday that raising the cost of handgun permits especially would improve public safety.

"These fees are meant to cover the costs of State Police background checks on prospective gun buyers — and, right now, they don't come close to doing so," he said during his annual budget address.

(The State Police did not immediately respond to questions about the costs of their checks.)

All but one fee hasn't increased since 1966, officials said. The FBI background check fee concerns a system that wasn't created until the 1990s.

The change would bring in \$8.5 million every year, according to Jennifer Sciortino, a spokeswoman for the treasury department.

The governor also proposed fee hikes last year and the year before, only to be rejected by fellow Democrats in the state Legislature. He is facing similar pushback.

State Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, has said that while he's open to a tax on millionaires, he doesn't "really think we need the other taxes."

State Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, said he remained “cautious of increasing any broad-based taxes on an already overburdened state.” A Coughlin spokesman said the lawmaker wouldn’t comment on any specific proposals until later in the negotiating process.

Gun advocates aren’t happy with Murphy’s plan.

“The governor is back yet again trying to harass honest gun owners,” said Scott Bach, executive director of the Association of New Jersey Rifle and Pistol Clubs. Residents shouldn’t have to pay any fees to exercise their rights, Bach said, and upping charges would only make it harder for low-income people to defend themselves.

Bach’s group is also suing to overturn New Jersey’s limitations on carrying guns outside the home. Local governments have also protested current restrictions. West Milford, Sussex Borough, Stillwater Township, Cape May County and Monmouth County, among others, have recently passed resolutions in support of the 2nd Amendment, some declaring their town a gun “sanctuary.”

At a recent hearing in Stillwater, one attendee brought up how armed parishioners had quickly stopped a shooter at a Texas church in December, likely heading off more violence.

State lawmakers are also weighing a bill that would allow an armed guard in temples, churches and synagogues.

In response to the resolutions, the state attorney general sent a letter Friday to county prosecutors. While local officials were free to “express their views,” Attorney General Gurbir Grewal wrote, they could not tell local cops “to stop enforcing such firearm laws entirely.”

“My real concern is that these so-called ‘sanctuary’ resolutions will confuse otherwise law-abiding residents, who may incorrectly believe that they no longer have to comply with firearm safety laws,” Grewal wrote. “This confusion can create serious risks for law enforcement and the public at large, with potentially deadly consequences.”

The governor has signed bills that reduce magazine capacity, made it tougher to obtain a handgun permit and expanded background checks on private gun sales, among other changes.