

## Everyone Has the Right to Breathe Clean Air

My colleague Dick Traini and I recently introduced an ordinance which would prohibit smoking in public places and the work place. This ordinance does not ban smoking. It does not prohibit smoking in your own home. It does not prohibit smoking outdoors. It does, however, ask smokers to respect non-smokers and to “take it outside”.

Before introducing this ordinance, I spent nearly a year researching the health issues and the economic data related to second hand smoke and smoking bans. I shared what I read with the trade associations representing some of the bars. I urged discussions between the bar owners and those supporting a ban on smoking. In short, I made every effort to understand the issues and to obtain information from those who might be affected. As a result of my research, two things became apparent to me.

First, it is clear that second hand smoke is far more than an annoyance. Second hand smoke is significant public health issue. Over the past two decades, research documenting the harm caused by secondhand smoke.

The recent Surgeon General’s report states that nonsmokers exposed to secondhand smoke increase their risk of developing heart disease by 25 to 30 percent and lung cancer by 20 to 30 percent. The National Cancer Institute has identified secondhand smoke as a leading cause of death from heart disease and cancer. The Alaska Department of Health and Human Services reports more deaths caused by secondhand smoke than by motor vehicle accidents and by homicide.

The second thing I learned is that the predictions of economic disaster are meritless. Other communities throughout the nation have taken action to protect non-smokers from the harm caused by secondhand smoke. Hundreds of local governments, fourteen states and nine Canadian provinces have adopted laws banning smoking in the workplace.

Based on these actions, there is now extensive data on the economic consequences of smoke free laws. In a recent review of over 90 studies of the economic consequences to businesses (bars and restaurants) when smoking is prohibited, the reviewers concluded that “all of the best designed studies report no impact or a positive impact of smoke-free restaurant and bar laws on sales or employment.”

This tells me is that scientifically sound analysis proves with substantial certainty, that smoking bans do not have adverse economic consequences. That's why many business leaders support smoke free laws. After New York went smoke free, Dan Meyer, President of Union Square Hospitality Group, stated "Every single fear that was injected into this argument in New York has not only not come to pass, but it's been just the opposite. Restaurants are busier than ever. Bars are busier than ever."

Some folks say the proposed ordinance is an "assault on personal freedom". I disagree. I welcome the discussion about protecting freedoms. I don't question the right of smokers to damage their own health. However, they shouldn't be able to impact the health of others. The proposed ordinance won't eliminate smoking. The ordinance will only limit where smoking takes place so others are not harmed. A smoker's addiction is not more important than other peoples' health.

Everyone deserves the right to breathe air free of secondhand smoke regardless of where they work. No one should be "barred" from a business because they don't want to breathe tobacco smoke. No one should be required to choose between their health and keeping their job just to make it more convenient for someone else to smoke. The burden of responsibility should be squarely upon those who smoke to do so in a manner that doesn't harm others.

The bottom line is that reducing exposure to secondhand smoke saves lives and does not harm the economy. In fact, business may improve and, most certainly, the health of the community will improve.

A legitimate role of government is to ensure the basic rights of individuals are not violated by others. The proposed ordinance protects everyone's fundamental right to breathe smoke free air in public places and at work.