

Philadelphia Inquirer

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Burlco ban on smoking in recreation areas takes effect May 31

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POSTED: May 25, 2013

Smokers are welcome in fewer outdoor places as bans against lighting up in parks and recreational areas are adopted with increasing frequency in the region.

Even some beaches are off-limits.

Burlington County joined 183 other counties and municipalities in New Jersey on Wednesday when it snuffed out smoking in its parks, according to the Global Advisors Smokefree Policy (GASP), a nonprofit that promotes the trend.

In Philadelphia, smoking is prohibited at city playgrounds, pools, and rec centers; New York City extends its ban to sidewalks in some business districts, according to GASP. The Shore's Seaside Park has smoke-free beaches, as does Belmar, which goes so far as to include its boardwalk.

"Across our nation, there is a strong trend for communities wanting to protect children from secondhand smoke and be role models for helping kids not start to smoke," GASP executive director Karen Blumenfeld said. Her organization released a white paper this week detailing the growing popularity of outdoor smoking bans. It's at <http://www.njgasp.org/Outdoor%20bans%20white%20paper.pdf>.

But the bans have also ignited a debate over where to draw the line between health concerns over secondhand smoke and smokers' rights.

Mount Holly Mayor Richard Dow questions whether a total prohibition at parks and other public lands is fair, even as the town council he presides over prepares to vote on a ban of its own.

"The bottom line is smokers are citizens and they pay for public space as anyone else," Dow said. He supports designated areas in playgrounds, ball fields, and parks where smoking should be banned to protect children from secondhand smoke, but says there should also be areas where smoking is permitted.

A nonsmoker, Dow said that he was "a personal-freedoms guy" and that increasingly "vilified smokers" have a right to indulge in a legal habit.

Westville Borough got a taste of the controversy after it outlawed smoking in municipal

buildings and on municipal grounds last year. The Gloucester County community repealed the ban in January after some residents complained it was too restrictive.

A replacement ordinance bars smoking "within 50 feet of any borough athletic fields, basketball courts, playgrounds, and tennis courts" and near the entrances of municipal buildings, administrator Bill Bittner said. It also allows "smoking sections" to be established on borough property and sets maximum fines for violations at \$100.

This month, Evesham Township showed a more serious attitude, adopting a fine of up to \$2,000 and up to 90 days of imprisonment for anyone who dares to puff on a cigarette, cigar, or pipe in any of its parks, fields, and adjacent parking lots.

"If you're going come and watch your child play, you are not going to smoke," Mayor Randy Brown said in an interview with 101.5 radio. He said he pushed for a ban after receiving a letter from a fourth grader who questioned why smoking was allowed at parks.

Callers, however, said the bans were forcing smokers to stand behind bushes and to feel like criminals.

Mount Holly's mayor also raises the issue of whether total bans are enforceable. "If someone is in a canoe on the creek, or in his car in the parking lot, would he be subject to a \$2,000 fine?" he asked. Two parks in his township are bisected by Rancocas Creek.

Mount Holly Township Councilman Jason Jones, who proposed a ban this month, dismisses Dow's arguments. He says anyone at the field who wants to smoke can "go into their car and smoke."

The issue, he said, is public health. As president of a local Little League organization, he said he had seen smokers in the bleachers and on the sidelines of a game blowing tobacco smoke near children's faces. When asked to stop, he said, the smokers would simply say it's a public park and they can do as they please.

Mount Holly is poised to pass the ban as early as next week with Dow the lone opposing vote.

Though smoking bans are gaining traction in communities, only nine of New Jersey's 21 counties have joined in.

Burlington County Freeholder Joanne Schwartz said she saw several other benefits to a smoking ban.

Last summer, Camden County made smoking illegal in its parks; the Gloucester County Board of Freeholders introduced a ban around the same time but pulled it from the agenda, saying there were issues with enforcement still to be addressed.

Burlington County's resolution goes into effect in all of its parks and on its growing trail system along the Delaware River and Rancocas Creek on May 31, in honor of "World

No Tobacco Day," promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Schwartz said that the ban was a way to rid parks of secondhand smoke and that it also would cut down on littering and send a message.

"It encourages people who are smokers to go into smoke-cessation programs and also sends a very positive message to young people who might take up smoking that this is not a very good idea," she said. "We don't want people dying of emphysema and cancer."

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http://articles.philly.com/2013-05-25/news/39504698_1_outdoor-smoking-bans-out-smoking-smokers