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Kevin Riordan: Can't argue with this smoking ban

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I used to smoke cigarettes, and some of my best friends still do. But it's as a matter of principle that I dislike the demonization of smokers.

After all, Marlboros - like deep-fried cheeseburgers or vodka martinis - are potentially lethal, but they're also perfectly legal.

So when I hear about Camden County's ban on smoking in its 20 parks, my inner libertarian lights up. The notion that the great outdoors ought to be rendered as smoke-free as an enclosed private workplace seems absurd. Particularly so in New Jersey, which is hardly known for the pristine quality of its air.

But I'm willing to listen.

"At best, it's obnoxious," Freeholder Jeff Nash says, referring to smoking in general, and second-hand smoke in particular. "At worst, it's deadly."

Nash, whose father was a smoker and died of lung cancer, stands in front of a new sign in the Berlin Park playground, just off the White Horse Pike in Berlin Borough. The freeholder, other officials, and the sign are all there to announce that the area is officially "Tobacco Free." The signs - total cost \$2,600 - are being installed in all county parks and in particular near playground equipment.

"If people want to subject themselves to their own smoke I would not stop them," Nash says. "But to spread that smoke to children is wrong." The county regularly hears from citizens concerned about public smoking in parks, "particularly after large events," he says, adding that his office received "18 or 19" formal complaints in 2011. "It's one of the top complaints we get about the parks."

The ordinance was inspired by a Berlin resident who noticed adults frequently smoking around the playground equipment where children were present. It has been on the books for about a year, but the park police have only recently begun to issue oral warnings to violators. Repeat offenders risk a \$50 fine.

"I see this as a grassroots effort to educate the public," Camden County Park Police Chief Robert Colangelo says. "We will aggressively do this - but in a good manner."

Robert Blaker, the county's director of public safety, likens the ordinance to seat-belt laws. "The bottom line is, this is an ordinance, and it's actually a very good one," he says. "It's about a quality-of-the-park (offense)."

It's also a public health issue, notes Jessica Backofen, the American Cancer Society's interim regional vice president for South Jersey. Nationally, she says, second-hand

smoke annually causes 3,400 deaths from lung cancer and 46,000 from heart disease. Given that second-hand smoke contains 4,000 substances, including 60 known or suspected carcinogens, about 700 municipalities and counties across America have instituted some form of outdoor-smoking ban. "The most powerful effect these bans can have," Backofen adds, "is on children."

I ask Genesis Santana, 13, for her opinion. Santana lives in the Cramer Hill section of Camden, two blocks from Von Nieda Park. She is active in a community group, organized by St. Anthony of Padua Church, that has cleaned up litter - including an abundance of cigarette butts - at the park, and lobbied for drainage and other improvements there. On July 13, she was part of a delegation that travelled from Cramer Hill to the federal Department of Health and Human Services to make a presentation about their community's effort to reclaim Von Nieda. "I hope (the ban) changes people's ways of thinking," Santana says when I call her.

Backofen says changing behavior also is a goal. And as someone who remembers the haze of the *Mad Men* days - when everyone smoked, everywhere - I can't deny how much less toxic public places have become because of restrictions.

As for the ban in the parks, Nash says: "We are going to rely upon people using common courtesy and common sense." If that's lacking in an individual whom police cite for repeatedly violating the ban, he says, there's the disincentive of the \$50 fine.

"But the true penalty for smoking," he adds, "is death."

Hard to argue with that.