

NorthJersey.Com

Fort Lee officials kick-off non-smoking health drive

MAY 2, 2014 LAST UPDATED: FRIDAY, MAY 2, 2014, 12:32 AM

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FORT LEE SUBURBANITE

FORT LEE – Flanked by Mayor Mark Sokolich, Council President Armand Pohan and other local dignitaries, Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle kicked off a public health drive on April 25 to urge towns across the state to follow the lead of Fort Lee and ban smoking in public parks.

The borough plans to pass an anti-smoking ordinance on May 8, joining 26 other Bergen County communities that have designated their parks and recreational areas smoke-free in recent years.

Fort Lee will display signs throughout the borough where smoking is banned. The signs, similar to the one above, are provided by Global Advisors for Smokefree Policy (GASP), one of the groups spearheading the anti-smoking effort. Advocates say the ban helps prevent youths from picking up the addictive habit, protects citizens from the dangerous health effects of secondhand smoke and keeps public places clean.

"Momentum is on our side," said Huttle. "Not only is it a good public health policy, but it's a good environmental policy."

The former Bergen County Freeholder began her campaign against smoking 11 years ago, having grown sick of seeing her daughters "sliding into cigarette butts" at playgrounds and inhaling secondhand smoke on park benches.

"I said, 'You know, my girls and I as non-smokers have rights and the smokers are infringing on our rights,'" she said.

Huttle is now fighting for those rights at the state level, where her bill to prohibit smoking in all state, county and local parks, beaches and recreational areas awaits passage by the Senate and the approval of the governor.

More than 230 New Jersey municipalities have passed resolutions or ordinances

in support of the ban.

Fort Lee already restricts smoking in some of its public spaces; in 2008, it passed an ordinance against smoking in wading areas of public pools and in 2011, it banned people from lighting up in fenced-in areas of tennis courts.

"We've always had a problem with cigarette butts and litter and with complaints from folks so we're grateful for the initiative, grateful for the folks that brought it to our attention and nudged us along to do it," said Sokolich, who is among the 15 percent of New Jersey adults who smoke. "It's just a win-win for everybody. It's now a healthier environment, it's a cleaner environment."

The borough will enforce the ban through periodic patrols by the health department and the building department, he said. The police department has also been notified to keep an eye out for violators.

Those caught in the act will be fined at least \$250 for the first offense, \$500 for the second offense and \$1,000 for each subsequent offense. E-cigarettes are not included in the ban.

Global Advisors for Smokefree Policy (GASP), one of the groups spearheading the anti-smoking effort, is hoping to eventually persuade all 565 state municipalities to enact similar measures. Councilman Pohan, the sponsor of Fort Lee's ordinance, said he supports the goal wholeheartedly.

"This is the most urbanized state in the country and the more urbanized we are, the more important the parks are for all of us," he said. "To keep them smoke-free so that people have a chance to breathe fresh air and have a nice walk and see the grass and not the litter... is a great thing."

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