

Courier-Post

EDITORIAL: Smoking ban is just what the doctor ordered

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Summer was just getting started in June when the Legislature passed by large margins a bill that would limit smoking on beaches and ban the filthy habit completely in parks and forests. For the first offense, those who light up could be fined \$250. That would double to \$500 for the second time and hit \$1,000 for the third.

But with less than a month until Labor Day, Gov. Chris Christie has yet to act on the measure. Time is running out for Christie to sign it, veto it or return it to lawmakers with suggested changes. If he does nothing, it will take effect in six months. We urge the governor to make a strong statement in favor of protecting the health of New Jersey's precious people and places by signing the bill into law.

Since 2006, when the New Jersey Smoke-Free Air Act banned cigarettes in indoor workplaces and public spaces, more than 200 municipalities have gone above and beyond the state mandate by prohibiting smoking in parks and other outdoor spaces. At least 18 have approved bans on smoking on their beaches.

It's time for the rest to follow suit.

In New Jersey, 17.3 percent of adults smoked in 2012 — below the national average of 18.8 percent, according to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Nearly 64 percent of smokers were reportedly attempting to quit. Yet for a vocal contingent of unapologetic smokers, the rest of us are the ones with a problem. They argue that their rights are under attack, that those who don't want to be exposed to smoke should just walk away. This is absurd.

Cigarettes don't just put smokers' health at risk. Secondhand smoke contains hundreds of toxic chemicals and 70 carcinogens, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Thousands of nonsmokers die each year from diseases linked to secondhand smoke, and the annual cost of health problems linked to secondhand smoking exceeds \$6 billion.

Plus, the smoke is irritating and the odor offensive.

Smoking in beaches and parks has additional risks. Discarded cigarettes pose a threat to wooden boardwalks, while butts are too often left to pollute the sand or be consumed by fish and other marine mammals.

The measure on Christie's desk isn't perfect. Under a compromise, officials could designate up to 15 percent of the beach as smoking zones. As anyone who remembers restaurants that tried to battle secondhand smoke with signs and creative seating arrangements, concentrating cigarettes in a roped-off area does little to clear the air. That's just as true outdoors, where a breeze can spread foul smells as easily as it can dissipate them.

While the 15 percent allowance still leaves too much of our beaches open to smoking and littering, an 85 percent ban is better than nothing. Towns that recognize the health and safety benefits of going smoke-free could always adopt stricter rules, and we are hopeful that they would.

Indeed, Belmar, which had tested the waters with a partial ban, went further in May when the borough council voted to eliminate designated smoking zones and enforce the policy year-round. Ocean City soon followed by getting rid of all smoking areas on its boardwalk.

In promoting Belmar's move, Mayor Matt Doherty pointed out that cigarette butts are the most common type of litter left on the beach. Clean Ocean Action, which organizes beach sweeps each year, routinely collects tens of thousands of cigarette remnants discarded by smokers who seem to view the sand as their own personal ashtray. Last year, cigarette filters and packaging accounted for more than 10 percent of debris collected by volunteers.

By signing the bill to ban smoking at beaches, parks and forests, Christie can signal that we are worthy stewards of New Jersey's natural resources. We'll all breathe easier.

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