

Asbury Park Press

EDITORIAL: Clock is ticking on smoking ban

Asbury Park Press Editorial, August 8, 2014

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 Gov. Chris Christie has yet to act on the measure. His options are 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 people's health and enhancing their enjoyment of the outdoors 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 federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Thousands of nonsmokers die each year from diseases linked to secondhand smoke, and the annual cost of health problems linked to

secondhand smoke exceeds \$6 billion.

Plus, the smoke is irritating and the odor offensive.

Smoking on beaches and in 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.

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.

<http://www.app.com/story/opinion/editorials/2014/08/07/editorial-clock-ticking-smoking-ban/13737965/>