

The Star Ledger

Christie vetoes bill to ban smoking at N.J. parks, limit it at beaches

Brent Johnson, September 10, 2014

Smokers in New Jersey can relax.

Gov. Chris Christie vetoed a bill tonight that would have banned smoking in public parks and limited lighting up at public beaches across the state.

Under the measure — which **had overwhelming support** in both houses of the state Legislature — violators would have faced a \$250 fine for the first offense, \$500 for the second, and \$1,000 for an additional offense.

Environmentalists and anti-smoking advocates praised the bill as groundbreaking, saying it would curb secondhand smoke exposure, cut down on litter, and reduce the risks of fire.

Christie said in his veto message that he appreciates the concerns but derided the measure a "prescriptive, one-size-fits-all" ban.

The Republican governor, considered a possible GOP candidate for president in 2016, suggested that state lawmakers were overstepping their bounds by proposing legislation that should come at a local level. It's a notion that dovetails with the small-government views of conservative voters, whom Christie would need to court in a bid for the White House.

He noted that more than 240 of New Jersey's 565 municipalities and 12 of its 21 counties have ordinances in place that ban smoking in parks, while more than a dozen towns have banned smoking at beaches.

"Too often, policy-makers at more centralized levels of government encroach into areas of public policy previously reserved for more localized governing bodies." Christie said in the message. "I do not believe that the state should substitute its judgement for that of our local elected officials or upset the careful balancing of interests that informs the decision-making process at the local level."

But state Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttle (D-Bergen), one of the measure's sponsors, said Christie's veto is a blow to the state's public health and environment.

She stressed that it would have continued New Jersey's reputation as a state that has been tough on smoking. In 2006, the state banned smoking in indoor places and raised the age residents can buy tobacco from 18 to 19.

"Tobacco is the leading cause of preventable death in this country and everyone is well aware of the dangers of second-hand smoking in this day and age," Vainieri Huttle said in a statement today. "The damage discarded cigarettes do to our already fragile ecosystems is also well-documented. I would have hoped the governor would have joined the overwhelming majority of the legislature who supported this bill by standing up for the public's best interests.

The bill ([S1772/A1080](#)) went through a number of changes. In March, the Assembly passed a version that would have banned smoking outright at all public parks and beaches.

Then, the state Senate's health committee passed a compromise version of the bill, allowing county and municipal officials the authority to create smoking sections comprising 20 percent of any park or beach.

After environmentalists and health advocates pushed for a stricter measure, lawmakers agreed to allow officials to set up a smoking sections only on beaches and limiting the size to 15 percent of the land.

The final bill passed the Assembly, 64-8, and the Senate, 30-3, in July.

Jeff Tittel, president of the New Jersey chapter of environmental group the Sierra Club, accused Christie of siding "with the tobacco lobby over protecting our environment and public health."

"He is doing this because of his national political ambitions against what is best for the people of New Jersey," Tittel said in a statement tonight. "He is playing politics instead of protecting our children playing in parks or on beaches. This legislation would have helped us all breathe easier and protect our health. Instead, now our parks are at risk from damages and fires from careless smokers. Beachgoers will still be burdened with unnecessary second hand smoke while trying to enjoy a day at the beach. All because Governor Christie has a higher office in mind."

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