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Three Block Smoking Ban a Hot Topic in N.J. City

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The signs went up a bit over a week ago on the little stretch that is the Monmouth Street Business District in proudly blue-collar Gloucester City.

They took most folks by surprise: The no-smoking symbol and the "100% Smoke Free Public Property" sign.

By late last week, the police had yet to issue a ticket, but on sidewalks known for a fair yield of butts, the stubs were few and far between.

But if the smokes have been extinguished at least on those few blocks, the furor smolders on.

Mayor William James says the ban is part of an effort to clean up and revitalize the three-block commercial strip - an endeavor that has included acquiring three properties with about \$540,000 in state and federal funds. Decorative streetlights and flowering plants have been installed as well.

"We're taking an aggressive attitude toward fixing up the Monmouth Street Business District," said James, a smoker who voted for the ban and lives on Monmouth, near the district.

Phooey, say members of the Independent Citizens Athletic Club (ICAC), who bought their headquarters on Monmouth Street about 10 years ago, operate a bar and event hall on the premises, and, until recently, kept ashtrays outside the building for its smoking members and patrons.

Some members and others claim city officials are forcing their agenda on residents and merchants, and they say they suspect the city is out to get the ICAC property.

"They want to turn this street into Kings Highway in Haddonfield," said John Hunter, a former smoker and club officer in charge of the bar.

Hunter and others worried about the ban's impact on the club, particularly on its ability to attract events that pay a lot of its bills, including about \$10,000 in taxes a year.

Hunter said that every year except for last December, when another event was

already booked, the club lets the city use the hall rent-free for a holiday function. The city's Christmas movie is still shown on a clubhouse wall.

Meanwhile, on the city streets and online, a lively debate is zinging along.

Marie MacAdams, owner of Erin's Secret Garden florist and a nonsmoker, isn't missing the cigarette fumes from the smokers who would sit and puff on the bench outside her shop.

"Hopefully, it will work for everyone - that they can still run their businesses and still have nonsmoking," MacAdams said.

"I personally feel it's ridiculous," said Dawn Sorbello, a secretary at a law firm who was taking a cigarette break around the corner on Broadway. "Smokers have been forced out of everywhere. Now you can't even smoke [outside]. I feel it's overkill."

Gloucester City's ban got praise from Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy, or NJ GASP, because she said it helps reinforce the state's ban on smoking in most indoor public places and workplaces.

Various New Jersey municipalities and counties have smoking bans of one kind or another.

Westville in Gloucester County bans smoking on its athletic fields, basketball courts, playgrounds, and tennis courts. Cherry Hill's ban covers township-owned land and property.

Camden and Burlington Counties are among five statewide that totally ban smoking in their parks, and eight have partial bans, according to GASP. New Jersey is second only to California in smoke-free municipal parks.

Bans on public streets, though they exist nationally, are something else in the Garden State.

Ridgewood has a ban on smoking on a specific street because it is near a school, but Blumenfeld said Gloucester City's appears to be the only ban in the state on smoking on public streets in a shopping area.

The next couple of weeks, Gloucester City police will issue only warnings to violators, said city administrator Jack Lipsett.

The ban applies to all products containing tobacco leaf, including cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco, snuff, chewing tobacco, or other tobacco preparations. Fines range from \$100 to \$1,000.

It's too soon to say what going smoke-free will mean to Monmouth Street businesses, but Gloucester City got good marks from NerdWallet, a financial advice and tools site.

Of "cities on the rise" in New Jersey, based on the growth of working-age population, employment, and income, Gloucester City came in 10th. Haddonfield was 15th.

Still, Arthur Campbell, president of the Camden County Regional Chamber Of Commerce, was a bit dubious about how enforceable the new ordinance will be. "I'm really not sure we want police doing this instead of taking care of the general safety and well-being of the population," he said.

One thing's for sure: It has people talking.

Gloucester City journalist William E. Cleary Sr. said a story on his site, CNBNews.net, about the ban got close to 6,000 hits within a few days of its being posted.

"It's a hot topic," Cleary said. "A lot of people weren't aware of it. The first they heard of it was the signs."

A lot of the talk has been about more than just smoking. Some wrote about personal freedom. One online commentator referred to the mayor as "aka Fidel Castro." Another posted: "I say everyone from the ICAC walk across the tracks and smoke in front of Mayor James Home (*sic*)."

James defended the ban and the effort to upgrade.

Monmouth had a litter problem, he said, and "the biggest problem was cigarette butts. Freaking unbelievable."

While many residents have questioned the focus on the relatively small Monmouth strip rather than a larger commercial corridor like Broadway, James pointed to structures like the municipal building on Monmouth.

"This was the most prominent area in town that needed attention," he said.

He said he did not know if the city would acquire buildings in other commercial areas and doubted there would be another ban.

He denied the city was looking to acquire the ICAC's building. "Why the hell would we want their building?"

The goal is clean up Monmouth, butts and all, he said.

"The business owners were upset," James said. "They were outside sweeping."

In the five months Tae An and his wife have been running their Express Super Market on Monmouth, across the street from the ICAC and a block from MacAdams' shop, he used to have to sweep cigarette butts from outside the store every day. Still, he thinks it would be better without the ban.

"It's good to make it clean, but people don't like [the ban]," he said. "I think they should put more trash cans for cigarettes outside. That would be better. A lot of people smoke in this town."

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