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Essex joins NJ counties banning smoking at parks

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NEWARK — Essex County's parks will now be smoke free.

The county's Board of Chosen Freeholders voted Wednesday to approve an ordinance banning smoking in the county's 33 parks, county officials confirmed. Previously, smoking was only prohibited at one -- the Turtle Back Zoo, officials said.

According to the advocacy group Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy, which advised the board while it was drafting the ordinance, Essex is the seventh county in the state to pass a smoke free parks law. Burlington, Camden, Hudson, Passaic, Somerset, and Union Counties all ban smoking in their parks, and although Sussex does not have any county parks, it bans smoking on all county-owned property, said GASP's executive director Karen Blumenfeld.

"The real driving force for me was to continue the progression of protecting children, who use county parks all the time, from the dangers of secondhand smoke," Freeholder Vice President Brendan Gill, who sponsored the bill, said in a phone interview Thursday.

In addition to banning tobacco cigarettes, the bill also disallows electronic and other types of cigarettes, Gill said. The ban will also extend to other county properties, and a 25-foot radius outside the entrances to the parks, he said.

In a statement about the bill, Blumenfeld said collections at county parks have showed significant evidence of smoking on park property. In June of last year, a 45-minute 4-H Club cleanup of Riverbank Park in Newark netted about five pound of tobacco, she said.

Last year, the city **became one of 14 municipalities** in the county that ban smoking in local parks.

"With tobacco being the (number one) cause of preventable disease and death, it makes sense for Essex County to provide 100 percent smoke free parks and recreational areas for its residents and visitors," Blumenfeld said in the statement.

In June of last year, the state legislature **passed a bill that would have banned** smoking in all public parks and limit it at beaches across the state. Gov. Chris Christie **vetoed it in November**, saying anti-smoking legislation should be taken up on a local level instead.

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