

Smoking Ban Will Help Public Breathe Easier

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Two weeks ago I introduced legislation to ban smoking in all Montgomery County eating and drinking establishments. This bill would protect customers and workers from the known dangers of secondhand smoke.

A majority of my council colleagues support the bill. Here's why: Smoking is already prohibited in most public places in the county. You cannot smoke in theaters, banks or libraries. In fact, you cannot smoke in any Maryland workplace -- except restaurants. It's long past time to extend that prohibition to restaurants and bars.

This isn't a moral judgment. People have the right to smoke, whatever it does to their health. But that right ends where other people's health begins. This measure is needed to protect public health.

Exposure to secondhand smoke causes cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer reviewed 58 studies in 2002, concluding that secondhand smoke exposure increases the risk of lung cancer death in women by 22 percent and in men by 36 percent.

Secondhand smoke also causes heart disease. According to studies in the Journal of the American Medical Association, roughly 37,000 people in the United States die every year from heart disease caused by secondhand smoke.

The Environmental Protection Agency found that secondhand smoke causes and aggravates asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia in children. Secondhand smoke also causes low birth weight and sudden infant death syndrome. The Maryland Department of Mental Health and Mental Hygiene reports that about 1,000 Maryland nonsmokers die every year because of diseases caused by secondhand smoke.

Common sense tells us that restaurant workers are most at risk from secondhand smoke. After all, those employees spend their working lives in the neighborhood bistro you may visit once or twice a month. Prohibiting smoking there helps workers breathe easier. After California enacted its 1998 ban on smoking in bars, a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found dramatic improvements in bartenders' respiratory health.

Eliminating smoking in restaurants isn't just good for public health -- it's good for business.

Some restaurateurs, such as the Tastee Diner's Gene Wilkes, support the ban as long as it applies to bars as well. "I'm okay as long as there's a level playing field," Wilkes said. More than 60 reputable studies support Wilkes's view, finding that smoke-free restaurant and bar laws have no impact or a positive impact on sales and employment.

A Tobacco Control review of those studies verified their reliance on objective data provided to independent agencies. A few studies have found some negative effects on business from a smoking ban -- but all were funded by the tobacco industry, and relied on subjective impressions, not hard facts.

California, New York, Delaware and Maine, among other states, ban smoking in restaurants and bars. The Connecticut legislature just passed similar legislation, which the governor has promised to sign. More than 130 localities in 18 states prohibit smoking in restaurants. Montgomery County residents deserve no less. We should prohibit smoking in restaurants and bars to clean up the air for all of us.