

Smoking bans in parks controversy reignited

By Todd McHale Staff writer | Posted: Monday, March 18, 2013 6:00 am

As the weather warms and brown dormant fields begin to turn green, a summertime dispute starts to heat up: Should smokers be allowed to light up in public parks?

As smoking bans in parks continue to rise across the state, supporters and opponents of the initiatives remain fired up.

"Smoking is the No. 1 cause of preventable death," said Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy (GASP). "There are studies that show carcinogenic levels from secondhand smoke outside can be just as concentrated as indoor smoke."

The Summit, Union County, nonprofit organization, which has been the leader of tobacco control initiatives in New Jersey since 1974, has provided technical assistance to dozens of municipalities interested in establishing smoke-free parks and other public places.

So far, about a third of municipalities have joined the effort with the adoption or introduction of ordinances that prohibit anyone from lighting up in parks, recreational areas, beaches and other areas outdoors.

"Of the 566 towns and 21 counties in the state, 169 have passed a restriction on smoking in parks and recreation areas," Blumenfeld said. "Almost half of those are 100 percent smoke-free parks. That's what's really trending today."

Several more communities joined the list recently, and more are expected to do so soon, including Princeton, which would make it the first town in Mercer County to implement the restriction. Six Burlington County towns — Beverly, Burlington Township, Delran, Edgewater Park, Mansfield and Palmyra — have approved laws to restrict smoking in their parks and/or on municipal-owned property.

Palmyra Mayor Karen Scheffler said she believes the ban has been successful.

"We don't have any trash cans on fire or burns in the (synthetic) turf field anymore," she said.

Scheffler said she doesn't believe a park is the place for people to spark up a cigarette.

"We don't know all the risks associated with secondhand smoke, especially to young children, where it can be more dangerous to their developing lungs," she said.

Blumenfeld agreed.

"Secondhand smoke is dangerous," she said. "Children and the elderly are particularly susceptible to secondhand smoke exposure."

Representatives from the Citizens Lobbying Against Smoker Harassment dispute the organization's assertions and said the "anti-smoker activists' reliance on the mantra of 'no safe level' has no basis in science.

"While harm from another's cigarette smoke indoors remains debatable, there is zero valid scientific evidence that someone smoking outdoors is harmful to anyone," said Audrey Silk, founder of the organization based in New York City. "They cherry-pick from the only study they have to point to and ultimately fail to report the author's final conclusion: 'When the cigarette goes out, the smoke is gone — not like in a bar, where it hangs around for hours.' "

Many supporters argue that the ban in parks enables adults to be role models for children and will reduce cigarette-

butt litter and accidental fires.

“Emotional blackmail,” Silk said. “No other segment of society is having an otherwise legal activity rescinded on the basis of ‘going green.’ It’s designed as well to silence dissent, (because) who could be against the environment? Candles are responsible for accidental fires. But there’s no hate campaign against candle users, so there’s no call for their ban as well. It’s not about fires. It’s about the intolerance for smoking.”

Blumenfeld countered that even the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended last year that the best way for a community to help prevent youth tobacco use is to make it less affordable, restrict marketing, and ban smoking in public places, including parks.

The key is to normalize smoke-free environments, according to Blumenfeld.

“First, they exploit ‘for the children,’ also designed to silence dissent, and then attempt to compel me to carry their moral message ‘thou shall not smoke’ by rescinding my civil liberties, which is to enjoy an otherwise legal product and conscripting me into their war,” Silk said.

Regardless of the opposition, the tide seems to be rolling in favor of smoke-ban supporters.

“The overwhelming majority does not want to smoke and does not want to be around smoke,” Blumenfeld said. “When (parents) take their children to the park, they want the air to be clean.”

Several county towns that do not have the ban last week indicated that either it wasn’t an issue or they were concerned that a ban would violate a person’s civil liberties.

Medford Township Manager Christopher Schultz said the municipality considered a ban a couple of years ago but decided against it.

“The mayor at the time (Chris Myers) said he didn’t want to impede on people’s constitutional rights,” Schultz said.

After the township works its way through some recent financial difficulties, officials indicated that they might discuss it again.

“We have a draft of the ordinance,” Schultz said. “Now that things have settled down a little bit, we may re-approach the council to reconsider it.”

That’s exactly what members of GASP want to hear.

“We see this momentum continuing,” Blumenfeld said.