

Columbia Should Pass a Comprehensive No Smoking Ordinance

May 2008

The Columbia City Council will give final reading to our no smoking ordinance this Wednesday May 21st. This vote will be a critical step in making Columbia's work spaces and public places safer and healthier. Columbia passed a no smoking ordinance in November of 2006, but we did not enforce our ordinance until the South Carolina Supreme Court upheld the validity of cities enacting no smoking provisions. The South Carolina Supreme Court ruled in March that cities and counties could pass such ordinances, and the Court outlined how local no smoking ordinances must be enforced. The ordinance that City Council will consider enforces a violation as a civil penalty. Additionally, Council will consider making the smoking ban apply to restaurants and bars. I believe that a comprehensive ban, including bars, is essential to the health of all of our citizens.

Smoking is the single greatest avoidable cause of disease and death. In June 2006 report, *The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: A Report of the Surgeon General*, the Surgeon General concluded that many millions of Americans, both children and adults, are exposed to secondhand smoke in their homes and workplaces, despite substantial progress in tobacco control. The report concluded that secondhand smoke exposure causes disease and premature death in children and adults who do not smoke. Children exposed to secondhand smoke are at an increased risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), acute respiratory infections, ear problems, and more severe asthma. Smoking by parents causes respiratory symptoms and slows lung growth in their children. Exposure of adults to secondhand smoke has immediate adverse effects on the cardiovascular system and causes coronary heart disease and lung cancer. The Attorney General found that the scientific evidence indicates that there is no risk-free level of exposure to secondhand smoke. Eliminating smoking in indoor spaces fully protects nonsmokers from exposure to secondhand smoke. Separating smokers from nonsmokers, cleaning the air, and ventilating buildings cannot eliminate exposures of nonsmokers to secondhand smoke.

A smoke free ordinance that is anything less than comprehensive is hypocritical. Exempting bars from this ordinance sends the message that people who work in bars are not as valuable to society and their health is not worthy of protection. Employees should not have to choose between their livelihoods and their health, but many people are doing that every day. All employees, whether they work in office buildings on Main Street or in bars in Five Points, should be afforded equal protection when it comes to the air they breathe. This should include musicians and bartenders. Though numerous scientific studies and the experience of cities and states throughout the country have demonstrated that smoke-free ordinances do not negatively impact business, there is still a perception of lost revenue. A comprehensive law would create a level playing field for all business, especially restaurants and bars. When the actions of a few jeopardize the lives of many, then it is our duty to protect our citizens by adopting local ordinances for smoke-free indoor air in public places including restaurants and bars. Our country offers us many freedoms, including the freedom to do things that harm ourselves. Under the value system that most of us share, these freedoms reach their limits as soon as they put others in danger. We have already acknowledged that exposure to secondhand smoke is dangerous and should be avoided in the workplace – why would we want to discriminate against those who work in bars?

Columbia must join other cities with a comprehensive smoking ban including Charleston, Clemson, Greenville; Bluffton, Hilton Head Island, Mt. Pleasant, Sullivan's Island, and Surfside Beach. In the next few years, I think we will look back and not believe that people were allowed to smoke indoors in public spaces. Let's start now in Columbia making that a reality.

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