

The Cape May GAZETTE

MAY 12, 2011 • VOL. 16, NO. 22

City explores beach smoking ban

By CAROLE MATTESSICH
Staff Writer



Kim Burns, left, and Karen Blumenfeld provided city council with information on other towns that have made public areas smoke-free. In the foreground is a plastic jug filled with cigarette butts that schoolchildren retrieved from beaches.

CAPE MAY – At the invitation of Deputy Mayor Jack Wichterman, representatives of two anti-smoking organizations met with city council during its May 3 work session to describe the experiences of other towns that have made public areas smoke-free.

Cape May's governing body is exploring the possibility of making some beaches smoke-free by the 2012 season, and, according to Wichterman, this year will be "a year of education" on the question.

Karen Blumenfeld, of Global Advisors on Smoke-free Policy (GASP), and Kim Burns, of Atlantic Prevention Resources, provided council members with a chart showing that at least 21 New Jersey beachfront communities have taken steps toward creating a smoke-free beach environment, whether in whole or in part. Belmar went smoke-free in 2001 in areas

including its promenade, boardwalk and most of its beaches, Blumenfeld said.

She expressed reservations, though, about Belmar continuing to permit smoking within a 20-foot by 20-foot space on each of its beaches.

The spaces are located near the boardwalk and beach access points.

Similarly, Seaside Heights also has a nonsmoking ordinance that bans smoking except for a 25-foot strip at the top of the beach, according to Blumenfeld. The problem with these exceptions, she said, is they force everyone accessing the beach to walk through high concentrations of secondhand smoke.

"That's just unhealthy," she said, adding that it's a particularly acute risk for the elderly and very young beachgoers.

Also, Blumenfeld said, it's bad environmentally because cigarette butts – which take years to decompose – often find their way into the ocean.

Blumenfeld said that Seaside Park, another New Jersey shore community, just passed an anti-smoking ordinance for their beaches. Familiar with that measure, Wichterman said it will cover the town's entire two-and-a-half mile beach, as well as the boardwalk.

Nearby non-smoking areas include Sunset Beach in Lower Township, which has been 100 percent smoke-free for at least two years; Somers Point, which went smokefree in all public recreation areas eight years ago; Northfield, which has a smokefree park; and Hamilton Township.

Blumenfeld noted that the policy has not affected tourism at Sunset Beach.

Asked about enforcement issues, Blumenfeld said that in Belmar, where police enforce the ordinance, a total of only 45 citations have been issued over the years. First offenders are always given warnings, she said.

Council members expressed interest in the early-warning system, indicating they do not want a smoke-free program to alienate visitors.

"We really don't want to chase people out of town," Wichterman said.

Education helps people accept a new smoke-free policy, Blumenthal said, and that can be accomplished through signage, at city events, through newspaper articles, and by celebrating non-smoking-related dates like National Smoke-Out Day.

Burnes also spoke highly of education efforts, noting that most of her work is done

on “the prevention side” of the anti-smoking campaign.

Some programs have involved young people helping to clean up cigarette butts on beaches, she said, and the kids are suitably turned off by what they find. Kids are very concerned about the environment, she said, and that helps them make the decision not to smoke.

Education also helps reverse the belief of some people that smoking is a right, and that a smoking ban is taking something away from them.

Rather than concentrating on what people can't do, she suggested, it's well to stress how non-smoking environments benefit residents and helps beautify a town.

Councilman Bill Murray said that approach helped overcome his initial reservations about how a non-smoking measure would be received and enforced.

Councilwoman Deanna Fiocca said she conducted an informal Facebook poll and out of 60 replies, only two people responded negatively to the notion of non-smoking areas on the beaches.

Blumenthal added that there is no evidence that barring smoking on beaches would be bad for a beach town's economy. In Belmar, she said, beach tag sales went up 17.6 percent after the partial ban, and in New York City, which has gone entirely smoke-free in parks and recreation areas, people pay a premium to get into smokefree buildings.

“Our preference is 100 percent,” Blumenfeld said at the conclusion of her presentation, making clear that partial efforts are not as good as an entire ban. “If they can do it in New York What's that song?”

“If they can do it there, they can do it anywhere,” a member of the public piped up.