

Plan for smoking ban in Ridgewood parks moves forward - NorthJersey.com

Ridgewood council members are pushing ahead with a proposal to ban smoking in all village parks, but the governing body reached a consensus to exclude sidewalks and other specially requested areas from a future ordinance.



The Ridgewood Council is considering a smoking ban in village parks, similar to an ordinance recently enacted in Paramus.

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The council can introduce the ordinance enacting the new regulations as early as Wednesday.

The village is one of several municipalities that have been recently targeted by Global Advisors Smokefree Policy (GASP), a statewide program intended to create smoke-free environments in all public parks. GASP representatives, with support from the village's Parks, Recreation and Conservation Board, pitched their ideas in Ridgewood in January.

GASP has also appeared in Garfield, North Arlington, Wood-Ridge and Westwood, among other towns. If Ridgewood approves an ordinance, it will be the 15th municipality in Bergen County to adopt the 100 percent smoke-free parks policy.

Using ordinances already passed by other towns as a guide, council members have been fine-tuning a proposal to fit the village's needs. Since the plan was first discussed, the council has mulled over various components and details of a new policy.

Initially entertaining the idea of extending the ban beyond parks, such as certain roadways and sidewalks, the village opted against doing so.

"It becomes a Pandora's box if you do that because we don't have the police forces to enforce no smoking on a public sidewalk," Councilman Tom Riche said. "We have bigger and better things to worry about. I do agree that people should stop smoking, I'm just not sure that we should be legislating if we can't enforce it."

Deputy Mayor Albert Pucciarelli indicated that an ordinance might have a "prophylactic effect," in that people might simply not smoke in a park because it is prohibited.

"I'm not too concerned about the enforcement. Some people obey the law because it's the law," he said.

In addition to the lack of resources to enforce a wholesale ban, Councilwoman Bernadette Walsh indicated that residents have a right to smoke on a public street. According to Walsh, her concerns focus more on health and environmental issues.

"I would love for everyone to stop smoking - it's not healthy and that's my opinion," she said. "I would never want to impede anybody from walking down the street and enjoying a cigarette, as long as you don't throw the butts on the streets."

Walsh added that her home is located adjacent to a public park as well as Benjamin Franklin (BF) Middle School and The Valley Hospital.

"Students and employees of the hospital come down to the park by my house and they'll have a cigarette and throw the butts on the ground. I have a lot of butts on my street, which I don't appreciate," she said.

Matt Rogers, Ridgewood's municipal attorney, advised council members that they can establish the parameters to clearly define "park." According to Rogers, the governing body can designate a sidewalk that runs alongside a park or a bench on the park perimeter, for example, as a smoke-free location.

"We have the option to raise the fines and make it onerous on someone who gets caught," added Councilwoman Gwenn Hauck.

Mayor Paul Aronsohn considers the proposed smoking ban a "win-win" on two fronts. In addition to eliminating smoking from Ridgewood parks, the ordinance "also underscores a message that smoking is bad for children."

Aronsohn said he would reach out to the Board of Education and representatives from The Valley Hospital, who previously asked that the village ban smoking on sidewalks in front of their property and BF.

"With regard to sidewalks, if you do it one place, you need to do it everywhere," Riche said.

The council agreed to move forward with drafting an ordinance despite opposition from one Ridgewood business owner.

Gary Kolesaire, who runs the Tobacco Shop of Ridgewood on Chestnut Street, objected to GASP's proposal, saying that a smoking ban would lead to a decrease in the amount of money the store contributes to a federal program that funds health care for children whose families are at the poverty line.

According to Kolesaire, the Tobacco Shop donates \$1 for each pack of cigarettes sold to the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Other dollar amounts are contributed based on cigar and tobacco sales.

"If people stop smoking, [SCHIP] would not be funded. These impoverished kids will have a problem with health care," he said.

Kolesaire also debated the argument that smoke-free parks will result in clean air.

"I'm in agreement with [cleaner air], provided that [Ridgewood] also pass an ordinance that stops all automotive traffic within a half-mile radius of the park. Then the air will be clean," he said.

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