

Fort Lee officials express support of non-smoking ordinance

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FORT LEE — Fort Lee will likely be the latest New Jersey municipality to ban smoking in its public parks and recreational areas, possibly joining 24 other towns in Bergen County and more than 200 statewide that have already done so.

Mayor Mark Sokolich and members of the council expressed support for the initiative during a recent presentation by Global Advisors on Smoke-free Policy (GASP), a non-profit that educates and offers guidance on local smoke-free policies, and the Bergen County Integrated Municipal Advisory Council (IMAC), a coalition of tobacco control experts.

The two groups have helped Tenafly, Hackensack, Closter, Teaneck and other communities adopt ordinances that prohibit visitors to parks, playgrounds, ball fields and other athletic areas from lighting up.

"We'd like to eliminate another avenue for smokers and to give them a clear message that parks and recreation areas are places where people of all ages should be able to enjoy themselves without the worry, inconvenience and health hazard of secondhand smoke exposure," said Albert Ferrera, Jr., community tobacco program coordinator for the county's health department.

Fort Lee's Board of Health passed a resolution on Feb. 11 supporting the initiative. The mayor and council said they will decide whether to draft an ordinance on March 20, when the entirety of the council meets for a work session, and showed immediate enthusiasm for the idea.

"I can't think of even a remotely compelling argument to counter supporting the initiative," said Sokolich, who is among the 15 percent of New Jerseyans who smoke. "I'm probably not going to stop because of this... but that doesn't mean I'm not supposed to be a responsible leader. The benefits completely outweigh my addiction."

GASP and IMAC say the ordinance has not only protected and dissuaded teenagers from picking up the habit (studies show smokers begin smoking between the ages of 14 and 18) but also cut down on the amount of discarded cigarette butts.

A similar law enacted in New York City in 2011 helped reduce litter by 50 percent in six months, according to Karen Blumenfeld, Executive Director of GASP.

If Fort Lee decides to pursue the newest anti-smoking initiative, it won't be the borough's first. In 1999, the council banned smoking in public wading pools and in 2011, the Board of Health did the same for fenced-in public tennis courts.

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