

Puffing in parks may be prohibited

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HARRISON –

So you're a 10-year-old Little Leaguer getting up to bat and you hear your dad cheering.

You sneak a peak at his bleacher seat and, suddenly, you notice him light up a cigarette.

But you remember seeing signs in your school prohibiting smoking and you begin to wonder about those puffs of smoke starting to filter close to the field.

It's that kind of creative thinking that the advocacy group Global Advisers on Smoke-Free Policy (GASP) hopes to foster in its statewide campaign to get local and county governments to ban smoking in public recreation areas.

And it's got local officials thinking, too.

At its meeting last Wednesday night, the **Harrison Board of Health voted to ask the town's governing body to consider introducing an ordinance to establish "smoke-free zones" around the community.**

"It sounds like a worthwhile thing," said Town Clerk/Attorney Paul Zarbetski. "For me, I don't like walking through a cloud of smoke, even if it's outside."

"The mayor [Ray McDonough] says if the board's recommending that, then yes, we'll go forward with it," Zarbetski added.

"For now," Zarbetski said, "we're looking at parks and playgrounds – Roosevelt Park, which takes in the basketball and soccer courts and Library steps, the Little League field, and two Sussex St. playgrounds. If we expand it, we'll go from there."

That means that the public riverwalk behind the Hess station at Harrison Ave., for example, won't be affected.

GASP Executive Director Karen Blumenfeld did an "education presentation" in Secaucus at last Wednesday's meeting of the Hudson County Municipal Alliance, an advisory group that recommends substance abuse control strategies and found an enthusiastic backer in Kearny Councilwoman Carol Jean Doyle.

“We [Kearny Town Council] passed an ordinance in February 2008 banning smoking in municipal playgrounds and in May, we amended that ordinance to include additional play areas and ballfields,” Doyle recalled.

Now, Doyle said, the council would be asked to consider expanding that ban “to all passive parks,” such as the one next to Town Hall and Veterans’ Park on Kearny Ave., the Riverbank Park play and cooking areas, and Elm St. Park where the flags honoring veterans are located.

“We’re waiting on the county freeholders to act on West Hudson Park [straddling Kearny and Harrison] since that’s under the county’s jurisdiction,” Doyle said.

Doyle said she’d favor expanding the smoke-free zones in Kearny. “I feel so strongly about not sending mixed messages to our young people. We have signs posted in school warning, ‘Don’t smoke, don’t drink,’ then our kids go on a town ballfield and see people are smoking.” That should be corrected, she said.

A GASP representative is scheduled to address the Kearny Town Council at its Feb. 19 meeting.

Meanwhile, Blumenfeld is continuing to press the GASP agenda by circulating among communities around New Jersey. So far, she said, “about 120” of the state’s 565 municipalities have adopted some form of smoke-free legislation.

Elsewhere in The Observer’s coverage area, East Newark adopted an outdoor smoking ban for its park and playground areas in December 2002; Nutley banned smoking in township-owned or leased play areas during township-sponsored public or recreation activities in November 2001; Lyndhurst outlawed smoking at township-owned playground and recreation areas in October 2008; and North Arlington prohibited puffing at recreational fields owned or leased by the borough during borough-sponsored activities in February 2002.

“Our initiative is really about helping to ensure that kids don’t start to smoke, and getting communities to adopt 100% smoke-free zones normalizes our outdoor environments for children so they see the message that it’s best to have no smoking either indoors or outdoors,” Blumenfeld said, especially since statistics show that 90% of adult smokers start to smoke before age 18. In New Jersey, she said, 15% of the state’s adults still smoke.

Last August, Blumenfeld noted, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a recommendation to communities nationwide to look at smoke-free parks in particular.

That makes a lot of sense, Blumenfeld said, because “there is no safe level of secondary smoke, especially for seniors with chronic heart or lung disease. If they’re sitting on a park bench and someone nearby lights up, that could trigger an adverse health reaction.” And, she noted, smoking and secondary smoking is the “number one cause of death in the U.S.”

By setting up the smokefree zones, Blumenfeld said, communities benefit from seeing a reduction in littercontrol costs and the environment gains because fewer cigarette butts flow into public waterways and fewer small animals fall ill by ingesting tobacco waste.

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