

Montgomery bans smoking in some public places

Council members seek to extend prohibition; “How far can we go?”

by Erin cunningham, Staff Writer

Montgomery County smokers have been banned from lighting up in common areas of some properties and at some playgrounds.

The County Council voted unanimously Tuesday to prohibit smoking in hallways, laundry rooms, lobbies and other indoor common areas of multi-family homes, such as apartment complexes or townhouse developments. At least 1,200 properties will be affected.

The ban does not apply to outdoor common areas except playgrounds. The council altered the original regulation Tuesday to include a ban on smoking at all privately-owned playgrounds, not just those that belong to multi-family homes.

This would include playgrounds overseen by homeowners associations, but not playgrounds that are in the backyards of single-family homes.

Councilman Craig L. Rice (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown voted against the playground provision, but supported the overall ban.

“Folks who do smoke have rights,” said Rice, a nonsmoker.

He also questioned how a smoking ban would be enforced in outdoor areas.

“Which way does the wind blow,” he asked.

Now, several council members are interested in prohibiting smoking in other areas in the county, perhaps at public parks and other outdoor areas.

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, who proposed the ban, said he did not broaden its scope because he did not believe he would get support from a majority of the nine-member council.

Montgomery County already outlaws smoking in workplaces and restaurants. The county does not have the authority to ban smoking in parks overseen by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

However, Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park became emotional Tuesday when announcing her support for a smoking ban in all outdoor areas in the county that are maintained by the government. This would include parks, she said, and possibly bus stops.

“How far can we go,” she said.

Floreen, who announced this year that she is battling the early stages of breast cancer, said the issue was a personal one for her.

“Regrettably I've been spending a lot of time with people with cancer these days,” she said.

Council members who supported the partial smoking ban, which goes into effect next month, said it would help protect nonsmokers, including children, from coming into contact with unhealthy secondhand smoke.

Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring said it could help deter smoking as well.

Navarro said she quit smoking 20 years ago, but at the time thought she would be deterred if laws were passed that restricted where she could light up.

She said the county should encourage nonsmoking and make it more difficult to smoke in public.

The partial ban was opposed by the state's tobacco wholesalers, represented by lobbyist Bruce Bereano.

Prior to the measure passing, he described it as a “de facto ban on smoking in Montgomery County.”