

Palo Alto bans smoking at all parks

City Council dramatically expands proposed restriction on cigarette smoking

Palo Alto took its strongest stance to date against tobacco on Monday night, when the City Council swiftly passed a law that would snuff out smoking at all local parks.

The ban, which the council passed by a 7-1 vote with Pat Burt dissenting, goes far beyond the smoking restrictions that members were scheduled to consider Monday and that Mayor Greg Scharff had proposed in his "State of the City" speech in February. Initially, the council was considering banning smoking at five parks in the downtown and California Avenue area. That proposal ballooned at a March 19 meeting of the council's Policy and Service Committee, where members quickly and enthusiastically stretched it to every park smaller than 5 acres.

The revised proposal would have affected 24 local parks, including prominent gathering spaces such as King Plaza and Lytton Plaza and small, leafy hubs such as Heritage Park and Sarah Wallis Park. But on Monday night, the council found itself asking: Why stop there?

After a brief discussion, the council voted to direct staff to draft an ordinance that would ban smoking at all local parks, large and small. Burt, the lone dissenter, had no problem with the broader ban but argued that the city should slow down and give the public a chance to offer input. But others were all too happy to back the broad ban.

"I think it would be fabulous to have Palo Alto as a smoke-free-park city," Councilwoman Liz Kniss said.

"Maybe we should just outlaw smoking in the entire city," she added facetiously, spurring chuckles from her colleagues.

The council discussion of the smoke ban took only a few minutes and came on the heels a nearly three-hour discussion of the future of Cubberley Community Center. With no major disagreements, only two public speakers and little appetite for another extensive debate, the typically thorough council dashed through the discussion at a lightning speed.

Janet Ghanom, representing the nonprofit group Breathe California, addressed the council Monday and voiced support for the proposal on the agenda, which was to restrict smoking at all 24 parks that are smaller than 5 acres. She said her organization very much supports "declaring your parks smoke-free."

"We hope you will, in the future, include larger parks, but this is a very big 'Yes' from us and it affirms health for everyone," Ghanon said.

The "future" didn't take long to arrive and Ghanon's wish came true in less time than it would take to finish a cigarette. Scharff and Kniss both enthusiastically supported extending the ban to all parks and the rest of the council quickly joined them.

Staff had recommended sending the broad ban to the Parks and Recreation Commission, which would then make a recommendation to the council's Policy and Services Committee, which in turn would make a recommendation to the council. Scharff recommended skipping the committees and proceeding to the final step.

"I think we should just go ahead and extend it to all the parks," Scharff said of the proposed ban.

In adopting the ban, Palo Alto is joining a growing list of cities that have imposed new restrictions on smoking in recent years. According to a new report from the Community Service Department, San Jose, Campbell, Cupertino, Mountain View, Saratoga and Los Gatos have all adopted ordinances recently that ban smoking in certain parks and public spaces.

The report cites the harmful effects of smoking, including an estimate by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that about 443,000 deaths in the United States are attributed to tobacco annually. This includes about 49,000 that are attributed to second-hand smoke.

The council was also scheduled to consider on Monday whether the city should make a bid for buying the Hamilton Avenue post office from the U.S. Postal Service. But after the long discussion on Cubberley, members agreed to defer this discussion to a future meeting, most likely next week.