

NEWS FOCUS: Business community dismayed at regional plan to eliminate smoking in public

on the record



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JOYCE FRUSTAGLIO, REGIONAL NO-SMOKING COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSON

BAN MAY BUTT OUT BUSINESS

BY DAWN LIERSCH
Staff Writer

Some York business owners are demanding to be compensated for money lost if there's a region-wide smoking ban in the works.

Corey Shoebridge, owner of Lookers strip club in Newmarket, wants to be reimbursed the \$50,000 he spent on a special ventilation system to clear the building of smoke.

"You spend so much money just to go into business and then you spend even more to keep the environment safe. They never talk about how much money you've already spent," he said.

"I spent all this money to entertain both smokers and non-smokers. It's a real letdown to think we have to spend all this money to accommodate both and then they try to ban smoking."

The region's no-smoking committee has an ambitious plan to ban smoking in all public places by Jan. 1, 2002.

But Shoebridge said the ban threatens to bankrupt businesses where the majority of customers smoke and argues the committee hasn't considered measures already taken by business owners to appease both smoking and non-smoking customers.

Shoebridge said his 9,000-square-foot building would only need a 15-tonne heating and air conditioning system, with a price tag of about \$15,000. However, he spent more than three times that amount to install three 20-tonne units specially designed to change the air every 20 minutes.

The system rids the building of smoky air and replaces it with fresh air from outside, he said.

According to industry standards of 12 people per tonne, the units will keep the air fresh for 720 people. Lookers only has seating for 450 people. About 75 per cent of Shoebridge's customers smoke anyway, he said.

"It's such overkill, it's ridiculous. But, according to the committee, it's still not good enough," he said.

"(Government) allow people to sell cigarettes and alcohol so that they can get the tax money and then they decide where you can smoke and drink."

However, Cathy Jaynes, the region's family and community health programmer, argues the ventilation systems aren't doing the job.

"No ventilation system in the world can actually clean the air. Just having a fan in a restaurant with smoking isn't enough," she said.

Jaynes said the committee may consider allowing businesses to permit smoking in a designated area that is separately enclosed and vented to the outside, but she pointed out that still doesn't protect the health of staff working in smoking sections.

"What's the bottom line? Do you just want to protect those who don't want to smoke or do you want to protect everybody?" she said.

Vaughan Councillor Joyce Frustaglio, who chairs both the no-smoking committee and the region's health and social services committee, said she's not opposed to businesses being smoking only, but points out options are only at the discussion stage.

"They may have the choice of installing a self-contained ventilation system or maybe they can be a totally smoke-free bar... the committee will have to decide," she said.

Frustaglio added she's aware of the business community's con-

cerns, but maintains the committee has to consider the health of all residents.

"As regional councillors, we don't want to be penalized for being pro-active on a health issue... We're very fortunate to have a regional council concerned about the health and welfare of its residents," she said.

"We are aware of the economic concerns and we will make every effort to ensure whatever bylaw we decide on will create a level playing field for all municipalities."

Frustaglio cited the success of Vaughan's no-smoking ban.

Despite some initial concerns from business owners, Frustaglio said the city has been applauded for implementing the ban.

"The bylaw, just by its existence, is starting to educate the public," she said.

Mario Gasbarro, owner of Woodbridge Bowl, disagrees.

He said he has lost close to \$80,000 a year since Vaughan implemented a smoking ban in

1996 because many customers chose to go elsewhere.

"Plus they don't drink anymore when they don't smoke," Gasbarro said.

He, too, had a ventilation system in place but later had to redesign the building to create a smoking room. Vaughan's policy allowed up to 25 per cent of the bowling alley to have smoking in a separately enclosed room vented to the outside.

"With restaurants it's different, they can just divide the area in two, but I couldn't do that here or else I lose 25 per cent of my bowling space," he said.

Bob Doyle, manager of Markham Bowl, said he's concerned about losing business if smoking is banned.

"We already don't allow smoking in the lanes and people are already upset. Bowling and smoking go hand in hand," he said.

Ruth Burkholder, president and chief executive officer of the Markham Board of Trade, said many members are concerned about the money they've already spent on ventilation systems and about future loss of business if smoking is banned. Some argue without a province-wide ban, they'll only lose customers to businesses in nearby towns that allow smoking.

The board represents businesses in Markham, Richmond Hill, Whitchurch-Stouffville, Georgina and East Gwillimbury. Chambers of commerce in Aurora and Newmarket have yet to take a stand on the proposed smoking ban.

"It's a matter of freedom of choice. Businesses should be able to choose whether to allow smoking, non-smoking or a combination of both," Burkholder said.

But Markham Councillor Ralph Aselin stressed the committee's goals may have been misinterpreted.

"I think it has gotten in the papers that there is going to be a total smoking ban in a number of years and maybe that's not realistic. It's something the committee will have to talk about," he said.

"We're not out to destroy businesses. I see us working in conjunction with businesses... All we're asking is for people to look at their business and see if they can identify if non-smoking is more in demand. Without being dictatorial, we have to identify that maybe there is a need for a larger non-smoking area."

"People are looking for direction and politicians have to be responsible."

CASE FOR THE COURTS

U.S. attorney general gets hero status in York

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno is the new hero of the head of York Region's non-smoking committee.

Vaughan Councillor Joyce Frustaglio was thrilled to learn last week that Reno is suing tobacco companies for years of failing to properly warn the public about the deadly effects of cigarettes and second-hand smoke.

"I think that's a big coup for the nation as a whole," said Frustaglio, whose committee is hoping to ban smoking in all public places across York Region by Jan. 1, 2002. "It's something that will be discussed by our committee."

Although Frustaglio is hesitant about suggesting her committee will launch a similar lawsuit, she won't rule it out either.

"We're certainly not going to take it upon ourselves to sue the tobacco companies. I think that is something that will take a bigger body than us," she said yesterday.

Frustaglio plans to discuss the lawsuit with her committee.

"It's certainly an interesting aspect (to consider)," she said. "I'm going to be tabling that Reno

speech at the next committee meeting."

Frustaglio suggested the committee might have more success banding together with other regions to pressure the federal and provincial governments to ban the sale of tobacco products and prohibit smoking in public places.

But she argued the lobbying efforts won't have much effect if the regions haven't made strides in eliminating smoking.

Meanwhile, the committee, which has been accused of meeting behind closed doors without input from residents and businesses, was given legitimacy last week when regional council gave it task force status.

The existing membership, which doesn't include business representatives, was approved by council, although it may be reviewed by the task force.

Markham Councillor Ralph Aselin, a committee member who criticized the group's secrecy, is pleased the public will now be notified of future meetings.

"It has been a committee that has not been recognized by council and if it has been, it's been a big secret."



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