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## Garry Rayno's State House Dome: Expect new smoking ban debate



CONCORD, NH -- Legislative efforts to ban smoking used to draw huge crowds to lengthy public hearings where heavy hitters testified for or against prohibition.

Eventually, smoking bans were approved at restaurants, bars, public buildings such as the State House and some private buildings.

Social, fraternal or religious organizations have continued to welcome smokers because (1) they have restricted memberships and (2) some key lawmakers — including former state Sen. Jack Barnes, R-Raymond — did not want to restrict World War II veterans' activities after they had served and sacrificed for their country.

Two bills will be introduced in the 2014 session that may change things, however. A House bill will be sponsored by Rep. Steve Vaillancourt, R-Manchester, and a Senate bill will be sponsored by Sen. Lou D'Allesandro.

"I've always felt that if secondhand smoke will kill you in a restaurant, it will kill you in a social club," Vaillancourt said, noting the exemption has been debated before.

D'Allesandro said he was approached by members of Sweeney Post 2 and asked to put in the legislation. "I'm happy to do that for my constituents," D'Allesandro said. "They want to have a smoke-free environment."

Former post commander and current historian Mike Lopez said the post became non-smoking last July, noting it took about five years.

He said a survey was done of the World War II veterans who belong to the post's cribbage club and not one of them smoked.

Lopez said the post also surveyed its 1,300 members several times and eventually came to the conclusion a ban was the best thing to do.

After the ban was instituted, "people who stayed away came back to the post," Lopez said. "A lot of women who would not come with their husbands now come here."

He said they checked with other posts in Manchester and across the state, and many either prohibited smoking, limited it during dinners or were considering a ban.

Lopez supports the ban.

"Why should nonsmokers have to sit at a card game with people smoking," he said, "when it's not good for your health?"

The food and lodging industry opposed bans when they were first proposed, but eventually decided a statewide ban would level the playing field for everyone. It also didn't hurt that the ban allowed restaurant owners and managers to blame government for a smoker's inconvenience.

The fate of the latest legislative effort will depend on whether enough pro-ban club patrons turn out to make their voices heard over the objections of anti-ban patrons who don't mind smoked-filled rooms.

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