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Helena Expands Opportunities to Breathe Healthy Air

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Has this ever happened to you?

You’re headed into your favorite restaurant, looking forward to a good meal. But first you have to run the gauntlet of smokers who are clustered near the entrance. You find yourself holding your breath as you dash for the door. You know that cloud of secondhand tobacco smoke can cause heart disease, cancer, and other serious health problems.

When the Montana Legislature passed the Clean Indoor Air Act (CIAA) in 2005, it was trying to protect us all from having to breathe noxious tobacco fumes against our will when we’re inside a public place. The act has been a great public health success. In fact, it’s been called one of the most important public health policies in state history. It established smoke-free environments as our social norm.

What the CIAA didn’t anticipate was that many businesses would want to accommodate their smoking patrons by setting up outdoor smoking areas – and that nonsmoking patrons might not be able to avoid breathing tobacco smoke wafting from them.

Helena City Commissioners recognized this. They also realized that any effort to provide a buffer between indoor and outdoor air had to be flexible. If they set a single standard distance from a business entrance in which smoking wasn’t allowed -- say 30 feet -- that could just push smokers too close to the entrances of other businesses.

Just imagine trying to stroll down the Walking Mall without getting within 30 feet of any business! The commission wanted a solution that was both flexible and safe for smokers and nonsmokers alike.

Finding that solution led to the creation of a great partnership. Local business owners, health advocates, and representatives of the Helena Chamber of Commerce and Lewis and Clark Public
Health formed a work group to seek consensus on the issue. Over several months, they crafted a flexible resolution to improve outdoor air quality in Helena.

Not everyone was entirely satisfied with the draft resolution. Some thought it didn’t go far enough to protect public health. But it was a compromise that all agreed they would live with.

The City-County Board of Health and City Commission approved the resolution this past summer. It doesn’t eliminate outside smoking areas altogether. Instead, it encourages businesses within the city limits to take a closer look at how such areas affect the air their patrons breathe. It asks them to adopt individual business policies that work for them. This could mean banning smoking entirely anywhere on the business grounds or setting a smoking distance. Any policy must also comply with the Clean Indoor Air Act.

If you’re wondering how these policies would apply to e-cigarettes and vaporizers, the resolution encourages businesses to address these alternative forms of smoking, just as the CIAA does.

A few local businesses have already started to adjust smoking areas and create policies designed to further protect their patrons from secondhand smoke. We at Lewis and Clark Public Health are committed to working with businesses to implement this resolution by providing model policies, unique signage, and other tools.

We’re pleased with the success of this collaborative approach to policymaking. And we’re thrilled that, ultimately, the efforts of all involved will strengthen the Clean Indoor Air Act and increase the percentage of air that’s clean and safe to breathe.

If you’d like to read the full resolution, it’s available on the city website at https://www.helenamt.gov/fileadmin/user_upload/City_Commission/Resolutions/2019/Res_20551_Outdoor_smoke_free_areas.pdf

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