

Butt out: Reaction strong as Bonita considers snuffing out smoking in parks

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BONITA SPRINGS — Eight-year-old Sophia Evans of Estero is familiar with the tell-tale signs of smoking in the park where her brother and sister play Little League ball.

Wearing protective gloves, she often picks up garbage, including cigarette butts, that litters the Bonita Springs Community Park grounds in exchange for candy from the concession stand.

Her father, Dale Evans, said he'd support a proposed law that could leave fewer cigarette butts for Sophia to pick up.

"Kids, they live by example and (smoking) is an example I don't want to set for my kids," the father of four said.

The Bonita Springs City Council will consider banning smoking in public parks, particularly in places where kids congregate, such as bleachers and near dugouts, as part of several updates to the city's parks ordinance.

The issue is scheduled for a vote June 3. If passed, the changes would take effect a month later.

Keith Larson, parks and recreation manager, said the ordinance was under review when the city received e-mails from the community with a strong message: "We don't want smoking around our children."

The complaints have centered on one park -- Community Park, Larson said.

Resident Donna Raynor communicated her concerns about smoking near the ballfields in several e-mails to the city. She didn't identify her affiliation and in an e-mail to the reporter who requested an interview, Raynor said: "It's been a pet-peeve of mine ..."

"The board members and parents are still smoking underneath the concession buildings behind home plate," Raynor said in an e-mail to City Manager Gary Price that was copied to City Council and staff. "I do not have any way to enforce a non-smoking request without them seeing the signs."

If the ordinance passes, signs would be posted around the fields and in parks, Larson said, but enforcement could be difficult.

The one city employee on duty in the evening and on weekends, which is when Little League teams use the park, cannot leave the building to police the parks.

Larson said code enforcement officers could be tasked with ticketing smokers who violate the law.

One recent night, as the four ballfields were filled with children in baseball uniforms surrounded by cheering teammates and family members, smokers were hard to find.

One man smoking near the bleachers walked away from a reporter who tried to interview him for this story. No others were seen smoking around the fields or along the ball diamonds' edges.

Lori Burton of Bonita Springs said smoking in the parks seems to have decreased over the years.

Back when her 18-year-old son was in Little League, smoking during games and practices was more common, she said.

"It was pretty bothersome to have people smoking in the bleachers but I haven't noticed it this year or last year," Burton said.

Her 8-year-old daughter, Hailey Burton, dressed in her navy blue softball jersey, said she knew there was smoking because she could see the cigarette butts on the ground.

Lori Burton, like other parents, believes a smoking ban would be a positive move.

"It's not a good thing for the kids to see," she said, asking her daughter if she liked to smell smoke, to which Hailey replied: "No."

Nanette Ball, who volunteers for her 11-year-old son Jesse Ball's team, said the league has a no-smoking policy around the diamonds. Beyond health concerns, the precaution is taken because propane tanks that power concession stand grills rest along the outside of the stand in the center of the four-diamond park.

Smoker Amber Catoe, who was watching her nephew play, said a smoking ban wouldn't infringe on her rights.

She walks away from others and the fields before lighting up, "just to be courteous for nonsmokers," Catoe said. "(A smoking ban) is actually a good thing."

Some other Southwest Florida governments have broached the subject but not implemented blanket bans in parks.

Naples Mayor Bill Barnett suggested a ban last spring as a way to make Naples a green city. The City Council rejected it, saying the restrictions would be difficult to enforce and were inappropriate legislation.

Lee County Parks and Recreation manager Dave Harner said there are restrictions in some parks, such as the Estero dog park and in stadiums, but no overall ban in public parks.

Collier County government spokeswoman Camden Smith said one effort to ban smoking in parks never made it past an advisory board and to the County Commission for consideration.