

Target: young smokers

Quakertown might ban minors from lighting up

AS BAD AS SMOKING is for you, there is no law banning the physical act itself. The law says where you can't smoke (on school property, for example, and in many public and even private venues, such as restaurants), and who can't buy tobacco products legally (those under the age of 18). But it doesn't restrict anyone — even little kids — from lighting up. Anti-smoking regulations operate a lot like Prohibition, which never made drinking a crime but sought to end the consumption of alcoholic beverages by restricting the manufacture, sale and transportation of them.

Prohibition, we all know, didn't work and in part spawned one of the most lawless eras in American history. Anti-smoking campaigns have had more success, but there are still too many people, particularly young people, who dismiss the proven hazards of smoking in favor of whatever it is they get out of it.

Unlike smoking, which can cause all sorts of health concerns, skateboarding is a relatively benign activity favored by children and teenagers. But on crowded streets and sidewalks, skateboarding is a public nuisance, which is why a lot of communities have banned it. The same perception relates to smoking in Quakertown, where a couple of hot spots near local schools attract large numbers of students who nearby residents claim litter the areas with their cigarette butts and generally create an undesirable situation.

In response to complaints, borough police Chief Scott McElree suggested this week that borough council pass an ordinance banning minors from smoking in public. As outlined, the law, to apply boroughwide, would carry a possible fine of up to \$50.

We have nothing against motivating kids to give up a terrible habit. But we can envision fair enforcement of such a ban difficult if not impossible. Police have far better and more important things to do than rousting groups of young people who are socializing and for the most part, we suspect, not causing any more "trouble" than just gathering in large groups.

When one member of council questioned why police could not disperse the crowds by enforcing anti-littering laws already on the books, the police chief said it's difficult to determine who is littering in a large crowd. We think the same might apply to identifying smokers. In addition, police will be forced into checking a lot of IDs to see who is and isn't a minor. A new anti-smoking law will give police an ordinance to fall back on, as McElree says, but it will also be creating a lot more work for a limited number of officers. And if the law can't be enforced constantly and uniformly, it will be a bad law.

Ideally, teens and preteens should learn about smoking and its many downsides at home; sadly, parents aren't always the best role models. But it's doubtful that the borough can succeed where the parents and anti-smoking advertising campaigns have failed. If a law is successful in dispersing the crowds of students, it may have the unwelcome effect of creating a perceived anti-youth sentiment in the borough much the way a proposed curfew law did the same thing in Doylestown.

Littering and creating a public disturbance are against the law. Smoking, per se, is not. We think borough council and police should concern themselves with the former, not the latter.

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