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City Weighs Options to Tighten Smoking Regulations

By Cathy Tyson

City leaders are considering more restrictive regulations that could ban smoking in apartment buildings and condominium projects in Lafayette. There's a growing trend in California and individual cities to limit availability of acceptable smoking areas, in a not so subtle nudge toward supporting public health.

The California Air Resources Board classifies secondhand smoke as a "Toxic Air Contaminant;" the World Health Organization and the Surgeon General both agree there is no safe level of exposure to tobacco smoke.

Currently there's a proposed state law in the works, AB-746, that would further restrict smoking statewide; if passed, it wouldn't take effect until 2015.

In State of Tobacco Control, a report card of tobacco prevention measures by the American Lung Association, California earned an "A" for smoke-free regulations that banned smoking from schools to casinos. Many Bay Area cities including Pleasant Hill, Martinez and Alameda got high marks for ordinances that enforce smoke-free outdoor air and smoke-free housing. Concord bans all smoking downtown.

Unfortunately Lafayette earned a surprising "F" grade, due to rules dating back to the 1990s that were updated in 2009. The current regulations don't allow smoking in retail stores, commercial buildings, elevators, public restrooms, grocery stores and more. The update in 2009 added restrictions for indoor and outdoor smoking on city-owned property - but still allowed smoking on city streets and sidewalks along with inside private residences and some hotel rooms.

The city council received a thorough staff report that offered a range of options to help craft an ordinance that would provide protection to the public in recognition of research that indicates the dangers of secondhand smoke.

"Anything that generates smoke is a public health hazard," testified Denice Dennis with the Contra Costa County Public Health Department, to encourage city council members to tighten regulations. "Help us save lives, we are your constituents," said longtime resident Margo Connelly.

Options ranging from restricting smoking at outdoor dining areas to 20 feet away from business' doors and windows to inside and outside of multi-family units were discussed. There was support for some, but not all of the options.

Although it was late in the evening, the council directed staff to further investigate five of the 10 suggested options and will review the findings at a later date.

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