

On March 16, 2006, the city of Calabasas, California enacted a city ordinance to ban all public smoking. The "Comprehensive Secondhand Smoke Control Ordinance" included indoor and outdoor businesses, hotels, parks, sidewalks, outdoor patios, restaurants, and bars, anywhere a person might be exposed to secondhand smoke. California passed state-wide legislation years ago to outlaw smoking in offices and restaurants, but the Calabasas smoking ban is considered the most sweeping of any U.S. jurisdiction. Calabasas law enforcement officials even voiced concerns as to how the ordinance could be enforced.

The Senate in my home state of Oklahoma recently drafted Senate Bill 1875 and approved it in sub-committee. This bill was an attempt to remove current smoking exemptions for all tobacco retail stores, bars, cigar bars, and even restaurants who had previously incurred a huge expense to build enclosed, separately ventilated smoking sections. Thankfully, at this time, the bill did not receive enough support to move forward to a House of Representatives vote, yet the threat that it could be raised again in the near future still looms. Oklahoma Health Commissioner Crutcher was quoted as saying the hospitality industry would notice a neutral to positive economic impact as a result of the removal of these exemptions, and while that is highly debatable for the restaurant and bar industry, it absolutely would not be true for cigar bars and retail tobacco stores. These are tax-paying businesses whose owners and employees would be extremely affected adversely by these anti-smoking laws.

These attempts by anti-tobacco groups to decide for U.S. citizens where they can smoke will continue to advance unless those of us who cherish our liberties and freedoms stand up for our rights. Patrons of tobacco retail stores and cigar bars like the one my parents own are cigar and pipe smokers and choose to frequent their business fully knowing and appreciating that it is a smoking establishment. The same can be said for all their employees -- all are cigar smokers and enjoy working in an environment where others are allowed the freedom to smoke. There are no unwitting victims of secondhand smoke as all who enter are fully aware that the establishment allows smoking on its premises. Those who do not wish to be exposed to smoke can make the choice to not enter. The ability to make these choices is a right guaranteed to us by the Constitution.

Where does government interference stop? If these laws are being created in the name of "air quality", where will the line be drawn? Should pets be outlawed from any public area because of potential allergy problems for others in the area? Will all motor vehicles be banned due to their contribution to air pollution? Tobacco is not an illegal product and those who consume it should not be made to feel like they are criminals. This country was founded by people who had been persecuted in their home countries for their religious and political beliefs. Our bill of rights was established to keep the same thing from happening in this country, and unless we all stand up for these freedoms, the persecution will continue to advance unchecked.