

Smoke-free advocates urge statewide ban

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By: **By Helmut Schmidt**, INFORUM

Area health professionals and smoking ban advocates celebrated a full year of clear air in Fargo and West Fargo bars and restaurants by urging a statewide smoking ban.

“It’s a big deal. It gives us a milestone,” said Dr. Byrum Cartwright, chairman of the Smoke-free Air for Everyone coalition, during a news conference Wednesday at Labby’s Grill and Bar in north Fargo.

Cartwright said that he was embarrassed that the state Legislature “has dragged its heels” on enacting a comprehensive statewide indoor smoking ban.

“Cities in North Dakota are lining up to say this is what we want,” Cartwright said. “We don’t want our state to become the ashtray of the Northern Plains.”

SAFE announced that a study completed Monday found that 76.6 percent of those polled in Fargo and Moorhead favored the smoke-free ordinances that are now in effect.

Also, nearly 70 percent of those polled support expanding the state smoke-free law to prohibit smoking in all workplaces, including bars and lounges. Another 10 percent had no opinion on the issue, the Winkelman Consulting survey said.

Barry Nelson of Share the Air, a group that gathered petitions to put the bar and restaurant smoking ban on Fargo’s ballot last year, urged people to turn their attention to a statewide smoking ban.

“The cause is right. The time is right. We can do it,” Nelson said.

According to the North Dakota Department of Health, an average of 342 people die of cancer, another 290 of cardiovascular disease, and 245 of respiratory disease, due to the effects of smoking each year.

Also, about 11,000 youth are projected to die prematurely due to smoking, the department reports.

Fargo City Commissioner Dr. Tim Mahoney said last year’s ballot was a clear mandate from voters that was not challengeable.

Businesses and customers adapted well to snuffing out smoking, he said.

“Reality is, the bars have done well” and people have taken it well, Mahoney said. “This is a smoke-free victory in a small city.”

“Think of the lives we are saving day in and day out” and the millions in health care costs saved, said Brenda Warren, a former West Fargo city commissioner who championed the issue in her city.

Chelsey Matter, the tobacco cessation coordinator for Fargo Cass Public Health, said more people are trying to quit smoking in the area.

Matter said before the local smoking bans began, ND Quitline for Cass County averaged six callers a month for help with trying to stop smoking. With the ban in place, calls jumped to 20 a month, she said.

“Let’s go forward and make our state smoke free,” Matter said.

Costs of smoking for North Dakota

The North Dakota Department of Health estimates that the state spends \$691 per person on direct medical expenditure and lost productivity due to smoking in 2007.

In all, the state paid \$442 million in direct medical and lost productivity costs, while bringing in \$21 million in revenue from cigarette excise taxes in 2007, the department reported.