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Bar owners talk anti-tobacco plan by Jennifer Johnson

A new five-year plan to reduce tobacco in North Dakota by banning smoking in bars and other outdoor areas has local proprietors repeating a longtime mantra: business will be ruined.

A state committee formed after Measure 3, the anti-tobacco ballot measure North Dakota voters approved last November, is proposing to more than quadruple the state's cigarette tax to \$2 a pack and extend non-smoking bans to areas where public events are held, according to the Associated Press.

At Cowgals Saloon in Great Bend, where an estimated 85 percent of customers smoke, owner Natalie Johnson said her doors would be forced to close. The restaurant and bar is the only facility in town to offer the freedom.

"We've only had a couple of elderly ladies that have complained," said Johnson, who referred those customers elsewhere. "Don't pick on me because I choose to have smoking, I think that's everybody's right. Smoking is bad for you, but it's that person's choice to make."

A strong base of smokers also flow into Firehouse Pub on a weekly basis. Kirk Peterson, owner, said he's heard patrons say they would go to his bar if it became smoke-free, but they only go out once or twice a month and it doesn't substitute for the regulars.

"It doesn't take a lot to see what's happened to the bars in Breckenridge," he said.

The situation would be different if the initiative was local, he added.

"If Wahpeton does it alone, we'll lose tax dollars to every business six to eight miles out of town," he said. "If they want to outlaw tobacco, outlaw the industry altogether. Shut it down at the top, don't go state by state."

Gerald Pulvermacher, manager of Sportsman's Lounge, said the decision should be left up to the business owners, though a state-mandated change will likely be inevitable.

"It will be smoke-free in five years," he said. "I have that funny feeling."

Jason Bergstrand, tobacco prevention coordinator for Richland County Health Department, said his staff will be assessing the local support level for these policy changes in the near future.

If policy makers, community leaders and advocates work together to implement this plan, Bergstrand believes residents will see a dramatic decline in tobacco rates that will lead to saved lives and dollars for the state.

"I hope citizens will embrace the plan as it is a wonderful opportunity to do something remarkable for the health of our communities," he said. "The plan is not based on what we think will work in North Dakota, but rather on what we know will work as previously evidenced all across the country."