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Prestonsburg mulls smoke ban

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Jean Rosenberg and the other members of the Floyd County Breathe Easy Coalition filled the city of Prestonsburg's council room Monday to urge city leaders to consider a complete smoking ban for businesses in city limits. Convinced, the city's attorney will now draft an ordinance for such a law for future consideration. photo by Sheldon Compton

PRESTONSBURG – Members of the Floyd County Breathe Easy Coalition are gaining ground and with it support on their way to seeing a comprehensive smoking ban passed in businesses throughout Prestonsburg.

Taking the helm of this cause is Jean Rosenberg, with the Floyd County Health Department.

Rosenberg and fellow coalition members were out in full force when Highlands Regional Medical Center and St. Joseph - Martin implemented their tobacco-free policies, and applauded the recent move by McDowell ARH Hospital following suit in May.

And Monday evening Rosenberg and company took the game to another level, approaching the Prestonsburg City Council to place a smoking ban for businesses within city limits.

The request was approved with a unanimous vote from the council, which followed testimonials and discussion from both coalition members and city leaders.

The ban, if passed into law, would be a complete ban on smoking in all businesses and other public buildings in the city.

“We want to show our support for people who want to breathe clean indoor air in the workplace,” Rosenberg said.

The center of that discussion was to ask the council to request city attorney Jim Webb to draft an ordinance for future council consideration.

That request was given brief consideration following a roundtable of supporting comments from all involved

and then quickly gained approval.

“In 1987 I had a heart attack,” said council member Freddie Goble. “They flew me out to UK and the doctor asked me if I smoked. I told him I smoked two packs a day. He said then that he was going to help me, but that everything that was happening to me was directly proportional to the fact that I smoked.”

Goble also shared that he had spent 14 days in an intensive care unit and followed that with a host of additional procedures, including a triple bypass surgery. Goble said his personal story with tobacco started at the age of 12 when he first started smoking.

“We can’t go out to eat because I have problems with asthma,” said Linda Wells, who said she grew up with both her parents smoking. “The last time we went out, I was sick for three days after that. It really is a matter of life and breath.”

According to statistics offered to the council Monday evening, 70 percent of Floyd Countians do not smoke, making the issue a matter of public health, the coalition and city leaders say. This point stifled a suggestion from one council member.

“Do I have the right to tell them they can’t smoke?” asked council member Kelly Moore, who said that although he does not smoke, his wife does. “Maybe we should put this question on a ballot and let the people decide.”

This idea was countered quickly by Webb, who told Moore because it was considered a public health issue, the choice could not be decided by ballot vote by city residents.

Others who spoke during the open discussion included Felicia Keathley, a senior at Prestonsburg High School. Keathley said she has long since been unable to go to the restroom at her school because of the high level of cigarette smoke.

“I have to wait to use the bathroom at school because I also have asthma-like symptoms,” said Keathley. “And a lot of my problems have come from secondhand smoke.”

Council member Gorman Collins Jr., though voting to draft the ordinance, was one of few Monday who spoke to the views of those opposed to a smoking ban, primarily business owners within the city.

“There are some who are against this,” said Collins, a nonsmoker. “And these people have valid ... but we have to protect people, especially the kids, and I think this would be the right thing to do.”

Now that the council has asked Webb to draw up an ordinance, what will follow will be a series of meetings during which city leaders will offer first and second readings of the proposed law. During this time, the meetings will be open to the public.