

SMOKE-FREE WORKPLACES

Kudos to Surfside, Conway for leading way

By Renee Martin

The S.C. Tobacco Collaborative would like to commend the town of Surfside Beach and city of Conway for being the first Grand Strand communities to discuss smoke-free workplace ordinances.

As a statewide organization committed to reducing the toll of tobacco use, the S.C. Tobacco Collaborative strongly supports comprehensive smoke-free workplace ordinances at the local level. Since June 2006 when the U.S. surgeon general released his report "The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke," 10 S.C. municipalities have passed smoke-free laws.

Though a variety of arguments have been made on both sides of this issue, the surgeon general pointed out several key facts, which leave little room for debate:

There is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke, and "nonsmoking sections" do not protect against harmful cancer-causing agents.

Nonsmokers exposed to secondhand smoke at home or work increase their risk of developing heart disease and lung cancer; and

Ventilation systems, no matter how sophisticated, do not cleanse the air of toxic chemicals found in secondhand smoke.

Elected leaders in local municipalities throughout the Palmetto State realize that secondhand smoke exposure is a serious public health concern and that they can save the lives of their residents and visitors simply by adopting smoke-free workplace laws. Since last June, several communities have adopted such ordinances.

Some people argue that smoke-free laws should be a statewide issue or that towns and cities should wait for the S.C. Supreme Court to decide the validity of such ordinances. However, the legislature took no action on smoke-free laws this session, and each day delayed in adopting a smoke-free ordinance is time wasted in protecting the health of our state's human resources.

Comprehensive smoke-free workplace ordinances benefit all residents and visitors, but most importantly, they will protect the work force. All people, whether they work in office buildings or, like many Grand Strand employees, in restaurants and bars, deserve the right to breathe clean air on the job. Nonsmokers working in bars and restaurants who are even briefly exposed to secondhand smoke absorb dangerous levels of carcinogens, a recent study to be published in the August issue of the American Journal of Public Health found.

"The science shows that the threat of disease from secondhand smoke is no longer a distant threat," said Michael Stark, the study's lead author. "The amount of this carcinogen increased even within a single work shift."

While customers can choose where they want to eat and drink, many employees have no choice about where they work. They are happy to have a job.

Other S.C. coastal towns with tourism-based economies have successfully adopted comprehensive smoke-free workplace ordinances. We urge Surfside Beach and Conway to do the same and lead the way in Horry County. Perhaps other municipalities in Horry and Georgetown counties will follow suit, and our state will be able to brag about the coast's clean, smoke-free air along with its beautiful beaches and lush golf courses.

For more information about smoke-free efforts in the Grand Strand area visit www.smokefreehorry.org.

Martin is the executive director of the S.C. Tobacco Collaborative, an assembly of health organizations, community coalitions and businesses.