

Assembly Fails to Push Non-Smoking Ordinance to Ballot

Friday, 19 July 2013

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/130719.smoke_free_goes_down.mp3{/audio}

Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

It was a full house during last night's borough assembly meeting, one that erupted with applause when the assembly defeated a contentious secondhand smoking ordinance. The ordinance would have put the question of whether or not to allow smoking in indoor public places on the fall ballot. But the assembly's 4-0 decision means Kodiak residents won't get to vote on the issue come October.

The ordinance was arguably dead on arrival last night, primarily because its key supporters, Assemblyman Aaron Griffin and Assemblywoman Carol Austerman were absent. Griffin brought the ordinance forward a month ago and Austerman spoke in favor of it on multiple occasions. Assemblywoman Louise Stutes and Mayor Jerome Selby were also absent from last night's meeting.

Assemblyman Dave Kaplan said he didn't feel the ordinance was ready to see a ballot, but also took issue with the fact that a full assembly would not be voting.

"I also think that four assembly members should not decide to put this on a ballot measure. I'd feel more comfortable with the entire assembly, for any ballot measure. I think it would be reckless and irresponsible this evening if this moved forward to be put on the ballot."

There was no motion to postpone the vote until a full assembly could be present, so the matter was decided by the four members in attendance, and failed unanimously.

The assembly members weren't the only ones in the crowded assembly chambers against the ordinance. A majority of those in the audience expressed firm opposition to the public smoking ban, including George Gatter, owner of Tony's Bar.

"First off I'd like to say that clean air is a good thing, but people have a choice to walk in that door, if they're going to go into a smoking environment. Also the employees have a choice of working in smoking and non smoking facilities throughout the downtown area. But they choose to do this."

Not everyone in the room agreed. Danielle Ringer said the lack of employment opportunities in Kodiak often means people must choose between having a job and breathing clean air. She said the matter deserved a community vote.

“And tonight I urge assembly members to move this proposed ban forward to a public vote. For those of you on the assembly and for those of you that have talked tonight, who think it’s so strongly opposed in this community, let’s not deny the public’s right to vote on it. There’s definitely been a few issues that have been brought up maybe in the technicalities of it and the broadness, and I think before October there would be plenty of time to address the kind of nitty gritty issues.”

Assemblyman Tuck Bonney helped bring the ordinance forward with Griffin, but had a change of heart before last week’s borough work session and pulled his support.

While Bonney did vote against the ordinance last night, he also remained open to revisiting the issue of secondhand smoke in the future.

“And if the assembly wants to bring it back this winter to hammer it out and make an ordinance that fits Kodiak, fine. But this ordinance simply doesn’t work for Kodiak.”

Other Alaska communities like Anchorage, Juneau, Unalaska and Petersburg have passed similar non-smoking ordinances in recent years. Last night’s decision by the borough assembly means Kodiak will not join that list, at least not anytime soon.