

10 days until smoke-off, anywhere food is served

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Indoor environment in state restaurants to clear by March 1

By Randall Turk, Transcript Business Editor

Ten days from today, smokers will be "blowin' in the wind."

March 1, nobody with a lighted cigarette, cigar or pipe will be permitted to sit before a plate of food, a cup of coffee or even a beer or mixed drink in a restaurant or adjoining bar anywhere in Oklahoma -- unless the smoker puffs away inside a separately vented (and very expensive) room.

That is good news for nonsmokers, the majority of Oklahomans. But the glad tidings are tempered by "definite uncertainty."

The first step in enforcing the smokeless constraints on restaurants will be left to John Q. Public.

The state law banning tobacco use in most public places was enacted Sept. 1, 2003. Food service businesses were given 30 months from that date to comply. The purpose of the delay was to permit food establishments to build enclosed, separately vented rooms to isolate smokers from the rest of the dining public. Very few restaurants have chosen this alternative, officials say.

It must take considerable manual (and oral) dexterity to eat and smoke at the same time, yet the restaurant smoking issue has enflamed many a smoker. Already, smokers get exiled to parking lots, park benches and secret indoor hideaways. Many of them, angered by the inconvenience, say all the concern over second-hand smoke from burning tobacco is a lot of hooey.

But Oklahoma Department of Health quotes national statistics to show a lit cigarette, pipe or cigar kills from both ends. The lower combustion rate of passive tobacco smoke releases more harmful chemicals into the air than the actual smoker takes in, the government says. Of the 400,000 a year who die from smoking in the U.S., 50,000 are non-smokers. Most die from heart-related ailments, not lung cancer.

A survey of Cleveland County's some 400 dining establishments showed more than 90 percent of those responding will be smoke-free by March 1, said Amber Browning. She is with "Turning Point," a coalition of organizations and businesses formed five years ago to work on health initiatives. The coalition recently applied for a grant from the Tobacco Settlement Trust Fund for its anti-smoking programs, Browning said.

Turning Point conducted a Monday forum for restaurant owners at the Cleveland County Health Department to discuss the smoke-free law and its repercussions. The law obliges restaurant owners and operators to inform patrons of the new anti-tobacco policy.

"We feel it's the public's job to enforce it," Browning said. "The hospital [Norman Regional] is smoke-free inside and out, and there's not even a law to back us up." (In other public places, smoking is permitted outside if 15 feet or more from a building entrance. A restaurant patio might be in compliance.)

Still exempt from the smoking prohibition are stand-alone bars and taverns, cigar bars, retail tobacco stores, veterans organizations, workplaces in private homes and up to a quarter of the rooms in a hotel.

Initially, "upholstery issues" were at the seat of the smoking dilemma, two Norman restaurant owners said. Joe Sparks, owner of Legend's Restaurant, said he went smoke-free five years ago. Efraim Ramirez, who owns Tarahumara's Mexican Cafe -- Cantina, said he banned smoking there -- both for customers and his employees -- well before the upcoming restaurant deadline.

"Everybody's biggest concern is losing customers," Sparks said. "In my 39 years of restaurant operation," he said, "I've probably breathed more second-hand smoke than any human being. I've spent \$12,000 on reupholstering chairs damaged from cigarette burns."

When he banned smoking in his restaurant, Sparks said, "five customers were spitting mad, but several hundred others slapped me on the back and said 'good job!'"

Romero said his smoking customers "burned holes in the seats all the time." But he said health problems he and his employees encountered convinced him to ban tobacco use. "The smoke had bad effects on every one of us," he said.