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ESCONDIDO: City may ban smoking in parks

By DAVID GARRICK - dgarrick@nctimes.com.

ESCONDIDO ---- Escondido is one of the last cities in San Diego County to allow smoking in its parks, but that might be about to change.

The Escondido City Council has consistently rejected proposals to ban smoking in parks, with council members contending that the rights of smokers should trump concerns about second-hand smoke, toddlers swallowing discarded cigarette butts and careless smokers igniting wildfires.

But three of the five council members said Tuesday that they were open-minded about a new plan to ban smoking in city parks that has been proposed by a coalition of North County public health advocates, local teens and Escondido social service groups.

The council will soon be presented with the proposal, which would also ban smoking on the city's hiking trails and open spaces.

And in case council members think a complete ban would go too far, they will be presented with an alternate proposal that would restrict smoking to designated areas within parks, trails and open spaces.

Only Councilwoman Olga Diaz said Tuesday that she would definitely support a ban, but Councilman Dick Daniels and Mayor Lori Holt Pfeiler said they would probably vote for a ban if the legislation was written properly.

All three of those votes would be necessary, because Councilwoman Marie Waldron and Councilman Sam Abed said Tuesday that they remain firmly opposed to a ban. However, Abed said he would support prohibiting smoking in park areas where many people or children gather, such as playgrounds or amphitheaters.

Robin Bettin, the city's assistant director of community services, said she has worked with the city attorney's office this spring on the language of the ban, which, if approved, would be adopted as an amendment to the Escondido municipal code.

"It will be easily orchestrated once the council decides which direction they want to go," Bettin said.

The ban would not cost the city any money because the Vista Community Clinic's "Smoke Free North County" project has agreed to cover the \$1,800 required for 100 signs that would alert hikers and park visitors to the ban.

Bettin said such signs would be crucial to getting people to comply with the ban, because there are no plans to have police or other city employees enforce it.

Mayor Pfeiler said it was crucial for the city to adopt a meaningful ban that attempted to improve public health.

"I don't want this to just be another law on the books," she said.

Daniels said he didn't want the legislation to be too complicated or to "overstep" what the city could handle. But he also said that concerns about child safety and fire hazards made a ban seem wise.

But Waldron said Americans already have too many restrictions on their civil liberties.

"This seems like one more step toward saying you can't smoke anywhere," she said.

Abed said a ban would be too "black and white," suggesting that the city take a "balanced approach" by banning smoking only where crowds typically congregate.

Diaz said concerns about individual rights fail to account for how those individuals are affecting others.

"The smoke invades the space of other people," she said.

The ban was initially slated for council discussion May 20, but has been postponed until July 8.

Diaz said many supporters of the ban have called expressing concerns that the city was "giving them the runaround." But Diaz said City Manager Clay Phillips assured her the delay was based on the need to adopt a new city budget by June 30.

Phillips did not return phone calls Tuesday.

Besides deciding whether to allow smoking in designated smoking areas, the council would also have to decide whether the ban would extend to recreational areas such as Lake Wohlford, Dixon Lake and Daley Ranch, Bettin said. And if the council opts for designated areas, it would need to decide whether large parks, such as Kit Carson, would include multiple smoking zones, she said.

As of last winter, 14 of the 18 cities in San Diego County had approved smoking bans in city parks. In North County, only Vista and Escondido do not have bans.

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