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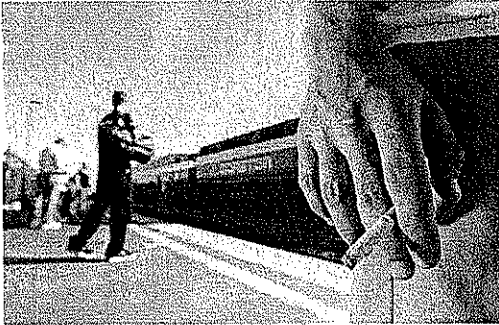
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NORTH COUNTY TIMES

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A passenger smokes a cigarette while waiting for the train at the Oceanside Transit Center on Friday. (Photo by Hayne Palmour IV - Staff Photographer)

REGION: Transit district eyes partial smoking ban at bus and rail stops

By PAUL SISSON - Staff Writer

OCEANSIDE ---- Anti-smoking advocates, who have already managed to kick butts off many parks and beaches, have turned their attention to North County's train platforms and bus stops.

Gena Knutson, manager of the Tobacco Control Program at Vista Community Clinic, asked transit directors at a meeting this week to ban cigarettes on all North County Transit District properties.

"We want them to know that people want to have smoke-free waiting areas when they're waiting for a train or a bus," Knutson said.

Knutson said volunteers recently visited all 15 Sprinter stations and six Coaster rail platforms in North County, collecting discarded cigarette butts.

"We also looked at about 120 bus stops throughout North County, including some out in the rural areas," Knutson said. "We found more than 12,000 (cigarette butts). To us, that indicates that there is quite a bit of smoking going on."

Smoking is already banned on all public transportation in North County.

So what's the harm in taking a drag or two out in the open air while waiting for a ride?

Knutson, and several other speakers who called for a smoking ban, cite studies that show any amount of secondhand smoke can be harmful to children and older riders.

The transit district has no policy that governs smoking at bus and rail stops.

Tom Kelleher, a spokesman for the district, said some riders have called and complained that they had to stand in a cloud of tobacco smoke while waiting for the Sprinter, the district's new 22-mile light-rail line that runs between Oceanside and Escondido.

The complaints, Kelleher said, spurred the district into action even before Knutson and others formally addressed the board.

He said the district is considering a policy, which is likely to be voted on at the board's Oct. 16 meeting, that would designate smoking sections in some small portions of the large transit centers that serve bus and rail traffic throughout North County.

Kelleher added that an outright ban on smoking at stations is not being considered, noting that many of the district's customers may prefer to take a drag or two before a long bus or train ride.

"We're not pro-smoking, and we're not anti-smoking," Kelleher said. "We're just trying to accommodate the people who use our service."

In addition to its seven main transit centers, the district operates 13 rail platforms for Sprinter and Coaster lines and about 2,200 bus stops throughout its service area, which spans more than 1,000 square miles.

While the district employs security officers who could enforce any new smoking regulations at its main rail and bus hubs, policing smoking at 2,200 far-flung bus stops would require many more employees.

Knutson said she does not expect the district to police its bus stops for smoking violations, but would like it to install no-smoking signs.

She said those bothered by smoking generally feel more comfortable asking a smoker to move if there is a sign nearby that prohibits smoking.

"We find that usually people are pretty compliant when they're asked to move," Knutson said.

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