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Cities Urged to Back Full Workplace Ban

By Jeff Nagel, Black Press

Two health organizations want B.C. towns and cities to join a push to snuff out smoking in specially built ventilated rooms found in many bars and restaurants.

The designated smoking rooms that allow patrons to puff were permitted as an exemption in 2002 when the province banned workplace smoking to protect employees.

But the B.C. Lung Association and the Heart and Stroke Foundation of B.C. and Yukon say the rooms have “resulted in a two-tier system in B.C. where workers in the hospitality sector receive less protection from second-hand smoke than all other workers in the province.”

The groups, operating under the banner of the Clean Air Coalition of B.C., are asking municipalities to back a resolution Merritt city council will propose at this fall’s Union of B.C. Municipalities convention, calling on the province to eliminate the smoking rooms.

“The premier’s going on and on about how we’re going to be the healthiest jurisdiction ever to host an Olympic games and we’ve still got workers being exposed to second-hand smoke,” said coalition spokesperson Sharon Hammond. “Economics should not trump health.”

The groups say although hospitality workers are given the choice of working in smoking rooms, no other workers in the province have to select between a safe workplace and their health.

They also allege there’s inadequate monitoring of workers’ exposure to smoke from the rooms, in contravention of WorkSafe BC regulations.

Employees in businesses with designated smoking rooms are to spend a maximum of 20 per cent of their shifts there and to enter only intermittently.

Hammond said there tend to be no log books or awareness of the requirement.

“Most workers say ‘What are you talking about?’ They don’t even know about it,” she said. “It’s completely unenforceable.”

The rooms have been built in scores of bars, restaurants, bingo halls, casinos and bowling alleys.

The coalition cites new research released this summer by the U.S. Surgeon General.

“There is no risk-free level of exposure to second-hand smoke,” the report concludes.

It found non-smokers exposed to smoke at home or in the workplace increase their risk of developing heart disease by 25 to 30 per cent and lung cancer by 20 to 30 per cent.

Even brief second-hand smoke exposure can cause immediate harm, the report said, adding even the most sophisticated ventilation systems cannot completely eliminate exposure and harm.

“Why do we have hospitality workers working in these smoking rooms when the health impacts are undisputable?” Hammond asked.

The resolution going to UBCM also urges Victoria to look for ways to ban smoking in outdoor public places like building doorways, patios, sports fields and grandstands.