

Published on HamptonRoads.com | PilotOnline.com (<http://hamptonroads.com>)

## Will GOP finally air smoking bill?

VIRGINIA Republicans are desperate to win back the suburban voters who lifted the party to prominence in the 1990s only to abandon the GOP for moderate Democrats in recent years.

Suburban voters have just one question for Republican lawmakers: What problem have you solved for us lately? That's a real chin-scratcher, but Republicans know they had better come up with an answer pretty fast or they could lose next year's gubernatorial election and forfeit their majority in the House of Delegates, the GOP's final toehold in state government.

There's a catch. Building roads and schools for fast-growing suburban communities takes a lot of money, and cash is in short supply now. There aren't many problems that can be solved gratis, but there is one.

Proposals to ban smoking in restaurants and bars poll at 70 percent or better, and the enthusiasm is especially keen in the suburbs. The trouble for Republicans is this get-out-of-the-doghouse-for-free ticket comes with a side order of humble pie.

For years, House GOP leaders have shepherded every smoking ban bill into a six-person subcommittee stacked with tobacco-friendly lawmakers and conservatives opposed to any restriction on individual liberties. The panel methodically kills the bills without allowing a vote before the full General Laws Committee.

"I might as well have been talking to the trash can last year," lamented Sen. Ralph Northam of Norfolk, whose smoking ban bill passed the Senate only to be snuffed out by the House subcommittee.

The chairman of the General Laws Committee at the time was Del. Terrie Suit, a Virginia Beach Republican who was previously sympathetic to smoking bans but changed her position after Speaker Bill Howell handed her the plum assignment.

With Suit's retirement, there's a new boss in General Laws, and health advocacy groups are feeling bullish about the 2009 legislative session.

Del. Chris Jones of Suffolk was named chairman last month, and there's no sign that he's been administered a blood oath. "I'm in favor of further restrictions on smoking in public, and there will be a full and fair hearing," Jones said last week in an interview.

A growing number of GOP lawmakers are eager to end the spectacle of their leaders' strong-arming popular bills into oblivion. And they view smoking bans as a health issue, not a libertarian litmus test.

Other sacred cows have already been abandoned to suburban realities, including Republicans' longtime opposition to photo-enforcement of red-light runners. Del. John Cosgrove, the sponsor of the red-light law and a member of the General Laws committee, says the smoking ban lacks the same public safety urgency. But the Chesapeake Republican said he and other suburban lawmakers are open to compromise on smoking restrictions.

"Probably the majority of my constituents don't want smoking in restaurants," he said, "but at the same time they don't like the government imposing a total ban on anything."

Balancing those competing demands will be tricky, but 2009 may be the year Republicans give it a try. If they're looking for a way to put the shine back in their problem-solving credentials, this may be their best shot.

*Christina Nuckols is an editorial writer for The Virginian-Pilot. Call her at (804) 697-1562 or write her at [christina.nuckols@pilotonline.com](mailto:christina.nuckols@pilotonline.com).*

**Source URL (retrieved on 01/22/2009 - 11:56):** <http://hamptonroads.com/2008/11/will-gop-finally-air-smoking-bill>