

The Roanoke Times

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Editorial: Let localities make the smoking call

Not just Hampton Roads localities should get the authority to ban smoking in restaurants.

The Hampton Roads region will push the General Assembly hard to win the ability to restrict smoking in restaurants.

As a recent editorial in The (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot noted, city councils representing more than 1 million Virginia residents have petitioned the General Assembly for permission to ban smoking in local restaurants.

That could be a difficult message for the General Assembly to ignore.

As much as we hope localities in Hampton Roads win the ability to limit a public and workplace health threat, it would be extremely unfair for the General Assembly to grant such authority just to localities in one region of the state.

If lawmakers find the arguments of those local officials persuasive, but still can't find the political will to ban smoking in restaurants statewide, they should at least give cities and counties across the commonwealth the ability to act.

Yes, that would result in a patchwork of regulations. But at least some localities would be able to protect employees and customers from secondhand smoke, a carcinogen that kills as many as 50,000 Americans every year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

Some argue that businesses should be free to decide whether they allow smoking. And many businesses are voluntarily enacting no-smoking policies as fewer and fewer Americans light up.

In Roanoke, several new restaurants -- including Blue 5 and 202 Market -- don't allow smoking. Even established businesses like Montano's have decided to kick the habit.

But businesses should not be allowed to choose to subject employees to an unsafe atmosphere, and a smoke-filled restaurant is unhealthy.

Restaurant employees shouldn't have to wait for the market to come around to accept the notion that smoke-free is more profitable.

We wish Hampton Roads officials well in their quest. But if lawmakers listen to those million or more voices crying out for breathable air, they should grant the same authority to localities across the state.

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