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Shifting Political Winds Blowing Smoke-Free

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Montgomery County. Melvin Thompson could understand. It's filled with government workers. "There's a tendency to believe government can solve problems for you," he said.

Similar sentiments run in Howard County, home to Columbia, the giant planned community. It wasn't until Prince George's last month to outlaw smoking in bars and restaurants, he said, that he fully understood how rapidly smoke-free forces can run through jurisdictions.

Thompson is a lobbyist for restaurant and bar owners in Maryland. He fights proposed smoking bans. Tracking his recent effort to explain how an area stretching from the District to just south of Ballimore could soon become a no-fly zone for smoking in bars and restaurants.

The Montgomery County ordinance is two years old. Howard's ban was proposed Oct. 25. The next day, a D.C. Council committee approved its measure. In Prince George's, council members will hold a hearing Tuesday and are poised to pass it.

"Initially, I wouldn't have said Prince George's was vulnerable," Thompson said, citing the county's desire to lure sit-down restaurants and concerns raised by the county's chamber of commerce and a strong working-class bar crowd near the Route 1 corridor.

But statistics indicate that fewer than one in four voters smoke. At the same time, anti-smoking advocates have been pushing with more research concluding that the bans don't hurt the restaurant business overall and that they protect workers from secondhand smoke.

smoke. Last month, Montgomery released a study showing that its ban hasn't hurt its hospitality industry

"In terms of what's good for votes, it's a political no-brainer," said Thompson, who asserts that many of the studies are flawed

In Virginia, where tobacco interests have long held political sway, a statewide ban on smoking in bars and restaurants seen anytime soon. And because the state's constitution generally forbids counties from passing laws more restrictive than the state jurisdictions are hindered in efforts to pass anti-smoking measures. Still, in Alexandria, more than 50 restaurants have voluntarily ban smoking on their premises, according to city officials.

"I think the entire state of Maryland and D.C. within the next two years will be smoke-free," said Kari Appler, executive director of the Smoke Free Maryland Coalition and Thompson's political arch-opponent on the issue.

Thompson said there are plenty of battlegrounds left, such as Anne Arundel and Baltimore counties. Smoke Free Maryland shows that although support is strong for statewide bans in suburban Washington, it drops to 55 percent in suburban Baltimore

Thompson and his supporters say the bans hit certain establishments hard, such as those catering to sports fans and draft houses. Thompson also takes the position that the known dangers of secondhand smoke are repeatedly overcooked. But, he said, many politicians want to hear his arguments.

"I don't need a ton of bricks to fall down on my head to know they don't want to sit down with us," he said of the Prince George's Council's nine members, only two of whom have returned his recent calls.

Thompson earlier worked for U.S. Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest, a Republican from Maryland's Eastern Shore. He then pursued a culinary dream and worked as an assistant chef in a French restaurant. He and his wife didn't like the hours, so he returned to politics with the Restaurant Association of Maryland five years ago.

In fighting this battle, he also faces challenges from his own side. He doesn't get much help from big chains, such as Outback Steakhouse and the Olive Garden, that survive more on dinner volume than bar receipts, independent restaurant owners say. Even some restaurant and bar owners who are members of his organization tell lawmakers they'd be willing to live with a statewide ban if it follows through with its own legislation, eliminating that competition.

And when Thompson tries to generate momentum among smokers, such as recently faxing material to bars in Prince George's County, they tend not to show up at public hearings, where ardent smoking foes regularly do, he said.

Local officials certainly are following trends. At least seven states, including California, New York and Delaware, and 180 local jurisdictions have smoke-free bars and restaurants. Even Ireland now forbids smoking in pubs.

In Maryland, smoke-free proponents say that Thompson is too quick to cite politics and criticize research and that local officials are trying to promote safe environments for all workers.

Debates on smoking in Maryland bars stretch back to at least the early 1990s. In 1993, Howard and Anne Arundel counties and Baltimore proposed cutting back. Even the restaurant association seemed to agree about the dangers.

"We see more and more scientific reports linking exposure of tobacco smoke with illnesses," Paula Kreuzburg, the association's president, wrote in a memo to the group's board of directors, according to a copy of the memo posted under the "Secret Documents" section of the Smoke Free Maryland Coalition's Web site.

In 1995, Maryland enacted rules barring smoking in indoor workplaces. But state politicians carved out exemptions for restaurants and bars. The industry's argument has long been that restaurants, and particularly bars, aren't like airplanes or office buildings -- they need smokers to thrive. In 1996, Howard County officials enacted a law calling for establishments to seal off smoking sections.

Things remained relatively quiet for the next eight years. Then, in 2003, Montgomery's ban went into effect.

As for Talbot County, where smoking in nightspots was snuffed out last year, it is increasingly filling with wealthy retirees -- longtime residents, weren't as apt to get a beer at a smoky bar, Thompson said.

He continues to distribute research by James E. Enstrom at the School of Public Health at the University of California at Los Angeles. Enstrom and others studied 35,561 nonsmokers with smoking spouses, concluding that the data didn't support a causal relationship between secondhand smoke and tobacco-related mortality.

Reached in Los Angeles, Enstrom said that he is not necessarily opposed to smoking bans -- in part because he thinks acti more dangerous than many people believe -- but that his research into secondhand smoke tends to be dismissed out of har environment. "All the science gets lost in the battle to implement these bans," he said.

Other studies, of course, show secondhand smoke to be dangerous

in Prince George's. Chairman Samuel H. Dean (D-Mitchellville) and council member Douglas J.J. Peters (D-Bowie) say the council to pass the smoking ban Tuesday.

Regarding possible sit-downs with opponents of the bill, Peters said, "What we're trying to say is we appreciate your input b weighed the pros and cons and we think public health is going to win out."

In the District, even council member Carol Schwartz (R-At Large), an opponent of the ban, said the measure is likely to pas said, "the votes are there for smoke-free."

The debate in Howard County might turn out to be the most contentious

Council member David A. Rakes (D-East Columbia) intends to submit legislation that grandfathers in establishments with se smoking areas. "They've already spent so much money to comply with our old law that we shouldn't now change the rules c said.

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