

A Busted Butt Ban

By Mark Fitzgerald

Published: November 5, 1998

When town officials in Seymour, Connecticut passed a ban on public smoking by teenagers, they didn't think many folks would oppose their effort to limit the opportunities for adolescents to puff away.

As it turned out, they were wrong. In a referendum held a few weeks after the ordinance went into effect in July, 1,366 voters in the community of 14,000 north of Bridgeport voted to overturn the ban, overwhelming the 545 who cast ballots supporting it.

Under the ordinance, anyone under 18 caught smoking in public more than once was to be fined—fines started at \$20—and required to attend smoking-cessation classes. But trouble arose once the order went into effect. Kids that hung-out in public places complained that they felt as if they were under constant surveillance and were piling up fines they couldn't pay. "Seymour became a police town," says Mary Adamowski, who organized the protest which led to the referendum. "It quickly became an issue of parental and personal rights."

But if the enforcement of the smoking ban undermined its goal, so too had the turning of heads as minors smoked curtailed the illegality of buying of cigarettes. "I don't understand it," explains John Sponauer, director of the Valley Substance Abuse Action Council, "kids can't buy cigarettes, but we let them smoke."

Although more than 71 percent of the votes overturned the ban, there is evidence that juvenile smoking prohibitions do have an impact. While Seymour's ban didn't last long enough to have a noticeable effect, officials in Alvin, Texas estimate that teenage smoking has decreased by 20 percent since that community implemented a similar ban three years ago.