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Vendor says smoking ban has hurt sales

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Ginger Rice
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Two months into Mesa Mall's no-smoking policy, some food vendors say it has driven business away, while other mall merchants praise the smoke-free policy.

The mall's ban on smoking has hurt business "tremendously," said Jonnie C. Keagle, owner of the Orange Julius stand at the west end of Cafe Court.

"I can document and prove that I've lost more money than when Exxon pulled out of here," she said.

Up and down Cafe Court, she said, it's the same story. Early-morning walkers are buying fewer pastries. High school students quit showing up for lunch. And mall employees who smoke now head for Chelsea's, which has a smoking area, or an outdoor picnic area provided by Herbergers.

Even nonsmokers who sympathize with the now-unwelcome smokers are staying away from the mall, said Keagle's manager Catherine Baskett. As a result, she said, Orange Julius revenues are off by half from last year.

Mall Manager Laurie Paquette said that sales reports from mall tenants indicate that only two vendors, both in Food Court but not including Keagle, reported lower

sales in April. May sales reports are due on Friday but won't be available until next week, she said.

One of A Kind Pizza Manager Richard Rulf is using coupons to combat a 10 percent year-to-year drop in sales and is distributing fliers to remind defecting customers that he can package "anything to go."

But, vendors complain, there's no place to go. The mall entrance closest to Cafe Court has a single bench but no table and no shade.

Most of the other stores and all of the anchor stores have long been smoke-free and managers generally say they haven't noticed any change in business volume since the April 1 policy change in the common areas.

"People don't stay as long," said Stacy Williams, assistant manager at Disc Jockey. "A lot of people can't go a half-hour without a cigarette."

"People who shop here from out of town on weekends say they'll only buy necessities and leave," said Phyllis Wood, a manager at Fashion Bar. "So you're missing the impulse buyer."

Paquette, though, said her comments are running 3-1 in favor of the ban and merchants say most

See Smoking, page 2B

Smoking

From page 1B

people seem to appreciate the cleaner air.

"My business is up," said Vern Thompson, manager at Gordon's Jewelry store. "We had a fantastic increase last month."

From his vantage point overlooking the mall's main drag, Thompson sees lots of people. And, he said, "Teen-agers that

were in here smoking are not smoking now. They're still here, but they're not smoking."

In other towns where malls have gone cold turkey, she said, some merchants have gone offsite and offered smoking "and they're making a killing."

Keagle thinks the mall should designate a vacant merchant space as a smoking area. But,

Paquette said, "I'm not looking at altering the situation."

That leaves people like Dan Austin out — in the hot sun, the rain, the wind, or, in winter, the cold.

"I hate it," he said. Instead of relaxing in the mall during breaks, he finds himself leaning against a brick wall outside.

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