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COMMENTARY

Ban would make bowling alleys go up in smoke

I don't like tobacco smoke infringing on my airspace when eating. Don't like it in my car. Don't like it in my house.

For all that, there is one place where its presence is accepted, if not appreciated.

A bowling alley.

There is something mystical about a bowling alley (OK, today they're called centers), from the whir of the lane machines early in the morning to the repetitive clatter of balls spraying pins at night.

And, generally, there is smoke. Don't know why, it just seems as if cigarettes and bowlers (not many, it seems, smoke pipes) go hand-in-hand, or hand-to-mouth.

It's no big deal, part of the package even to a non-smoker.

Smokers draw fire

But the Bowling Proprietors Association of Ohio fear government interference could prohibit the right of individuals to smoke in public areas. Currently, each community can pass its own bill regarding restrictions.

This is why the BPAO is supporting House Bill 299. The bill, which could be brought to the floor for a vote during this session, restores the right of building and business owners to set smoking policies that are best for their customers.

Springfield enacts no such limitations other than in its own city buildings, according to city manager Matt Kridler, and has no plans to do so.

You smoke, you bowl

The BPAO recently commissioned a survey of 373 bowling houses throughout the state. Here are the findings from Five W's and a W:

the same respected firm that brings us voting for the Academy Awards:

■ Nine out of 10 bowling centers will lose customers and revenue if smoking bans are enacted in their community.

■ Seventy-seven percent of proprietors indicated that more than 60 percent of their teams have at least one member who is a smoker. One in three proprietors believes these teams will discontinue bowling if there is a smoking ban.

■ Nearly half of the owners said that more than 60 percent of their sales are generated by smoking customers.

■ More than half of the proprietors surveyed offer non-smoking areas. Non-smoking nights are gaining in popularity and additional ventilation equipment is increasing.

BPAO member Chuck Kearney owns Victory Lanes in Springfield. He quit smoking 20 years ago but realizes a number of his customers do inhale — as many women as men.

He also realizes the importance smoking has in some individuals' lives.

"My wife said the other day that there are people who probably don't go to church because they can't go an hour without smoking," Kearney said.

Imagine, then, if church attendance increased by 10, 25, 33 or 60 percent — whichever figure you care to use as a comparison with the BPAO numbers. Perhaps — taking a wild stab here — the world would be a better place, if for no other reason than there would be less of a need for televangelists. Of course, cosmetic companies would take a hit in the makeup bag.

"We don't want to lose 10 percent of our business, let alone 60 percent," Kearney said. "If we lose 60 percent of our business, we'd have to close."

Rest assured

That is not likely to happen. The chances of restrictions in Springfield: "There's no active discussion," Kridler said.

And Kearney has taken several measures to make Victory Lanes more comfortable for the non-smoker. There is no smoking allowed at the scorer's tables — signs are posted saying it is prohibited. Smokers must go to the concourse area. An updated ventilation system is a possibility.

In 15 years at Victory Lanes, Kearney has only had three people tell him they would join a league if there was no smoking.

Those aren't exactly numbers to be leading a charge for reform, particularly for a businessman with a vested interest.

"I know I have people that smoke," Kearney said. "Will they quit bowling if there is a smoking ban? I can't answer that."

They might, which would be unfortunate.

No doubt those smokers would wind up in the next booth while I try to eat my dinner.

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