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Push is on for ban of smoking

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A push for a statewide smoking ban has been under way for some time, garnering support from the state Department of Health and multiple smoke-free organizations across the state.

Rankin County residents also are doing their part to ensure the possibility of a ban makes it through the state Legislature in the upcoming session next year.

The Mississippi Tobacco-Free Coalition of Rankin, Scott & Simpson Counties operates out of its office on Airport Road. And coalition members are passionate about their mission.

"If you look at other growing cities like those located within Rankin county, you will see that a smoke free ordinance can have a positive impact on businesses," said Amy Ellis, a coalition member. "I am a resident of Brandon and also frequent establishments in Flowood and Pearl, and they appear to be busy just like they were before their smoke free ordinances went into effect."

Fellow coalition member Ilene Harned concurs. "I will not go into a restaurant that allows smoking," she said. "Information I have received as a member of the coalition confirms that ultimately business increases. Plus the health of employees also improves."

"The fact remains, tobacco use and exposure to cigarette smoke have a direct effect on health and the economy," said Katherine Bryant, who works with the state's chapter of the American Heart Association.

"Studies have been conducted in communities outside of Rankin County, and the results show that when communities are smoke-free, there is a reduction in heart attacks as well as significant healthcare cost savings."

Bryant cited a study conducted by the Social Science Research Center that found a healthcare cost savings of \$2.3 million in Hattiesburg, which passed a smoke-free ordinance in 2007.

"If all workplaces were to implement 100 percent smoke-free policies, the reduction in heart attack rates due to exposure to secondhand smoke would save the U.S. \$49 million in direct medical savings within the first year alone."

Brandon resident Amber Beck recounted a tale of shopping in a Lakeland boutique that allowed smoking a few years ago, before Flowood enacted its smoking ban.

After smelling cigarette smoke upon entering the store, Beck said she left and has refused to return.

"Businesses thrive when they provide a healthier environment for their workers and patrons," Beck said. "Analyses of revenue from sales tax and hospitality tax in Hattiesburg, Starkville and Oxford demonstrate that sales in the restaurant sector of the local economy continued to grow after implementation of smoke-free ordinances."

Even as more and more cities in the state enact smoke-free ordinances, health officials caution that only 21 percent of Mississippians are affected by these bans.

Currently, 47 municipalities have smoke-free ordinances, prohibiting smoking in businesses. Five metro area cities have enacted these ordinances since 2010. Ridgeland kicked off the trend in the area with its smoke-free ordinance passed in 2007.

Still, health officials are urging for more protection for residents in other towns and in more rural areas.

In addition to working to provide safe air for all Mississippians, coalition members also are focusing on preventative measures to stop young people from taking up the habit.

"I think a number of programs have had a very positive impact," Harned said. "Working with youth in schools and community groups that include youth empowerment.

"I feel involvement in community events where information about tobacco reaches the general population has been helpful."

The work of the Mississippi Tobacco-Free Coalition of Rankin, Scott & Simpson Counties has made progress in educating the youth on living a tobacco free lifestyle, said Ellis.

"Statistics show that tobacco prevention at an early age results in less tobacco usage among youth," Ellis said. "The coalition has made great strides in helping Flowood, Brandon and Pearl pass a smoke-free ordinance and continue to make progress in helping other cities in Rankin, Scott and Simpson counties to follow suit."

Programs such as Reject All Tobacco (RAT) have been successful in educating youth on the dangers of tobacco use, Beck said.

"I recently was talking with a friend of mine who was amazed to know that her daughters after school program was a part of RAT," Beck said. "She stated that is why she comes home talking about how bad it is for her to be around smoking."

Other initiatives include Kick-Butts Day, which allows youth and businesses to partner to get out the message about quitting, Beck added.

"In Mississippi we offer a Tobacco Quitline which is free to all residents who wish to quit smoking," said Beck. "My clients say, 'This is free? How do I sign up?' They are amazed that we offer such a great service for free to help them overcome the habit."

To comment on this story, call Dustin Barnes at (601) 360-4644.