



Chamber should 'butt' out of smoking-ban issue

By Jim Waters

I like the sign I saw in front of a church once: “How will you spend eternity: smoking or nonsmoking?” stated the bold black letters.

“Nonsmoking” for me, please.

While I wish everyone would follow my lead, the reality is some people choose eternity’s “smoking” section.

I also wish everyone in Kentucky would choose to go smokeless before that trip to eternity occurs. Some 30 percent of Kentuckians smoke, a practice that carries with it a \$700-million price tag.

Some think this undesirable habit justifies government-mandated smoking bans that criminalize legal behavior and disregard important property and individual rights.

Not me. And not Kentuckians who believe that a free marketplace is better than government coercion, and given the chance, will result in fewer smokers, better health and reduced costs.

I would have thought that a group representing the interests of businesses would make it a high priority to reduce companies’ regulatory burdens by advocating for less, not more, government.

But get a load of this stocking stuffer. As part of its “wish list” for the 2008 legislative session, the Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce endorses a statewide smoking ban “in most public places,” even privately owned ones.

The chamber claims that its mission is to “develop strong businesses and a vibrant economy . . . resulting in a better quality of life for all.” Yet it endorses passing a state law that threatens a business-owner’s constitutionally guaranteed property rights under the guise of “quality of life.”

Watch out when government-types use “quality-of-life” speak. It’s usually code for more government encroachment into boardrooms, classrooms and bedrooms. Why don’t we hear more talk about “reclaiming lost liberties” or “shrinking the size of government” or “making schools more accountable?”

This chamber opposed school choice for the parents of Kentucky’s 109,000 special-needs students as part of its 2007 wish list. That’s no great surprise. The chamber’s vice president in charge of legislative lobbying is Stan Lampe, who previously worked for the state education cabinet. It’s not such a shocker, then, that Lampe, who undoubtedly exerts a lot of influence on the chamber’s strategy, thinks Frankfort is capable of solving all of our problems.

Perhaps it’s time for chamber members to encourage their advocacy group to increase its faith in the free marketplace, entrepreneurs and people.

These constituents should wonder aloud whether, considering the serious economic challenges facing Kentucky and the increasingly global competitive marketplace, trying to get Frankfort to impose smoking bans on Morgantown is the best use of chamber resources and influence.

Don't the chamber's leaders have enough to do to "develop strong businesses and a vibrant economy" without getting into a highly divisive battle? If not, perhaps they could read the Constitution – particularly the part about how important private-property rights were to the founders.

Most proponents of government-coerced smoking bans come with minds as narrow as a Virginia Slim. They refuse to allow for the fact that the marketplace does a better job than Frankfort of reducing smoking and related health-care costs and improving citizens' health.

For example, as teenagers get exposed to the health-shattering effects of smoking through education, they either kick the habit or refuse to light up in the first place.

Kentucky's Cabinet for Health and Family Services reported a 3-percent decline during 2006 in the number of teens who admit to current tobacco use. Admitted current tobacco use among teens declined by a whopping 13 percentage points between 2000 and 2006, cabinet data shows.

Of course, bureaucrats credit government action – primarily last year's tax on cigarettes – for the decline. But there was a 10-percent decline in tobacco use among teens before the tax hike.

Smoking rates dropped because kids got smart. Young people deserve some credit. Give them good information and many will do good things.

Besides, if God himself can't even make people choose "nonsmoking" for eternity, what makes big-government sympathizers at the Northern Kentucky chamber think another law in Frankfort can end smoking in Corbin or Covington?

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