

Woodridge eyes smoking ban in bars and eateries

By Don Grigas

Staff writer

Smokers who like to light up after a meal or while watching a football game at a sports bar in Woodridge likely won't have to worry about a proposed smoking ban being enacted in the near future.

But the time may come when smoking will be prohibited in Woodridge restaurants and entertainment establishments.

During a Sept. 1 workshop meeting, Woodridge Village Board members took the first step toward either drafting a municipal ordinance or endorsing regional action to prohibit smoking in certain retail establishments when they debated the proposal's merits.

No action was taken at the workshop meeting, but village staff is now in the process of gathering information from local businesses that the board will review at a later date, such as potential impact on village revenues and the overall response of area businesses.

The Woodridge Area Chamber of Commerce's Government Affairs Committee will invite more than 30 Woodridge area business owners to a meeting to discuss the issue in early October, according to Edie Bernstein, president and chief executive officer of the organization.

"We will ask a set of questions and document the responses, and then provide a written report to the board sometime before the end of October," Bernstein said.

The board of trustees is expected to meet in late October to prioritize a variety of issues it will deal with in the upcoming year.

All businesses that could be affected will be invited to the chamber session, not

just chamber members, Bernstein said.

John Perry, village administrator, said information compiled will be distributed and reviewed by staff and board members prior to the board's annual goal-planning workshop meeting.

"The Village Board is compiling information on a number of subjects for the purpose of discussing these items intelligently during their goal setting workshop in late October," Perry said.

"As a part of this effort, the village, partnering with the Chamber of Commerce, will go out to the business community for its input and perspective on a smoking ban. Since businesses that serve food or alcohol or are entertainment destinations would be the ones affected, they will be included in the process, which we are now working with the chamber to jointly develop that process," Perry said.

During the Sept. 1 workshop meeting, the board was split on several aspects of the issue, including how best to go about enacting legislation.

"A more regional approach may be more beneficial (than Woodridge enacting legislation), working through organizations such as the DuPage Metro Mayor's Caucus," Mayor William Murphy said. "This may give our business owners a degree of comfort."

"There is a way to do this, and we are not there yet. We, as a board, need to come to some kind of a consensus, and we are not there tonight," Murphy said.

During the workshop, the board narrowed the target businesses to establishments that are licensed to sell food and liquor, as well as entertainment venues such as bowling alleys and other game emporiums.

Businesses that market specifically to smokers -- such as cigar bars -- and open-air venues would not be targets of a smoking ban.

The issue is sure to touch off heated debate among smokers, nonsmokers and business owners.

"This will generate a lot of controversy, and we need to examine the potential impact on area businesses," Murphy said.

"It may be more effective to encourage business owners to do it (prohibit smoking in establishments) on their own voluntarily," he said.

Some board members said government should not interfere with business by enacting legislation that could have a negative impact on business.

"My concern is that we may be putting our restaurants and other businesses at a competitive disadvantage if we do something and surrounding communities don't," Trustee Jim Curran said.

Robert Brandt, who is a proponent of a smoking ban, said the interests of public health should outweigh business concerns.

"This is a matter of protecting public health. I won't place someone's business interests ahead of public health," he said.

Brandt cited studies that indicated some Chicago area communities have enacted smoking bans, and business has not suffered.

"In Highland Park, revenues have not changed, and in some cases, (restaurant business) has gone up because people have returned to restaurants who stopped going because of smoke," he said.

Brandt submitted his report to board members.

One resident, Sandra Knight, spoke to board members during the regular meeting about the effect of secondhand smoke on those who suffer from asthma and other respiratory ailments.

"I have 6- and 7-year-old sons who have asthma, and we have had to leave (establishments) because of someone lighting a cigarette in the area," she said.

She cited an instance in which one son attended a birthday party that took place at a local bowling alley, and someone on a nearby lane lit a cigarette.

"He suffered a pretty heavy (asthma) attack from that one cigarette," she said.

Knight said she soon learned, after researching secondhand smoke, that "it could be a serious health problem."

"I am very excited that Woodridge could be one of the first municipalities to adopt a smoke-free ordinance in DuPage County," she said.

She said many nonsmokers like herself who avoid going to restaurants that allow smoking would probably return if a ban was enacted.

"I think a ban would increase revenues, not decrease," she said.