

Village smoking ban unlikely soon

By Don Grigas

Staff writer

It's unlikely that a smoking ban in Woodridge restaurants will be brought to a vote by the Woodridge Village Board, based on the results of a village goal-setting workshop Oct. 27.

But that doesn't mean village officials won't try to encourage restaurant owners to take the initiative and enact their own bans.

During a workshop session in which board members established priorities for the 2006 budget year, a smoking ban ranked sixth out of eight issues, and generated only 6 percent of total points awarded by seven members of the Village Board -- six trustees and Mayor William Murphy.

However, the third-ranked issue -- encouraging restaurant owners to enact some type of smoking bans on their own -- could receive some attention over the next year.

The redevelopment of Janes Avenue near 83rd Street and engaging community youth ranked first and second, totaling 47 and 27 points, respectively.

Encouraging restaurant owners to develop stronger smoking restrictions ranked third with 26 points.

Senior real estate transfer tax waivers and audio-casting Village Board meetings ranked fourth and fifth, with 20 and 15 points, respectively.


The issue of the village trying to enact a smoking ban received nine points, ahead of a municipal Wi-Fi (eight points) and upgrading the village's audio system (three points).

The Village Board will use the rankings to help set budget priorities for the next fiscal year, according to Peg Halik, assistant village administrator.

The issue of smoke-free restaurants has been hotly discussed by trustees over the last six weeks, with a majority of board members saying they would not approve a municipally enacted ordinance but might endorse action taken regionally or by the state legislature.

Some are concerned that by enacting legislation without surrounding communities doing the same, the village could lose sales tax revenue if businesses lose customers to establishments nearby that don't ban smoking.

One trustee, Robert Brandt, has been a strong supporter of a smoking ban.



"A safe and healthy workplace should not be optional," Brandt said at the workshop.

In response to arguments that some businesses might lose revenue if a smoking ban were enacted, Brandt said: "None of our village's policies ensures any other businesses make money."

Some area business owners disagree, arguing neighboring municipalities that don't have smoking bans could benefit from one in Woodridge.

"People make conscious decisions to go where they are comfortable when dining out. When you mandate no smoking in Woodridge, you are chasing the smoking customer to the next town," said Rich Moore, manager of the Corner Clubhouse.

Moore, in a letter submitted to the Woodridge Area Chamber of Commerce Government Affairs Committee, stated that a smoking ban might provide one more reason to patrons to go elsewhere, and result in a loss of business.

"People are finicky and have many choices when it comes to dining out," Moore said.

Moore also said his regular customers -- most of whom reside within a few miles of the restaurant -- sometimes go elsewhere depending on such factors as the type of video games available, price increases, or loss of bartenders and staff.

Providing additional incentive could lead to patrons going to Bolingbrook, Naperville or Downers Grove to dine.

"We serve a smoking clientele and prefer to remain in business as is," Moore said.

Representatives from six Woodridge restaurants met with representatives from the chamber's Government Affairs Committee Oct. 12 to discuss the proposed smoking ban.

The group listed 11 concerns, including statistics that indicate some restaurants lost from 10 percent to 35 percent of their business when a smoking ban was implemented; the possibility of a loss of jobs linked to decreases in revenue; and the possibility potential new business owners might not consider Woodridge if a smoking ban were in place.

"I think it is safe to say there is a very strong opposition to any smoking ban in Woodridge," said Edie Bernstein, president and chief executive officer of the Woodridge Area Chamber of Commerce.

More than 30 area restaurants were invited to participate in the forum, with six responding, Bernstein said.

Brandt said more input, from a wide range of sources, is necessary to make an informed decision.

"We've heard comments from six restaurants. We still need to hear from health officials to learn about the devastating effect of secondhand smoke. We still need to hear from experts who have studied the economic effects of smoking bans, and we still need to hear from residents," Brandt said.

At a recent board meeting, Mayor William Murphy said he would favor working through organizations such as the DuPage Mayors and Managers Conference in lobbying for a regional approach to more stringent smoking restrictions in public places.

No other details regarding working through other organizations to support a regional smoking ban were provided by Murphy or trustees.

"It's something the mayor mentioned, and I hope he follows through on it," Brandt said.

Trustee John Curran said "what I'd like to see is a nice balance," between smoking and smoke-free restaurant venues.