

Shared public space requires protection

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Arlington Heights -- In listening to and reading about irate smokers and militant libertarians decrying the continuing expansion of the "nanny state," I'm struck by how often the government is taken to task for interfering in our lives.

The government is relentlessly blamed for things like the smoking ban and zoning laws and OSHA restrictions that crush the small businessman, and laws against jaywalking, and on and on and on.

It's as though the government were some enormous, distant creature dousing cigarettes and banning trans fats and patting us all on the head and sending us to bed with a glass of warm milk and a bedtime story.

The thing is, we are the government. The people we elected are doing our work.

They don't always do it well, it's true.

And for the most part, I'm with the libertarians out there. I, too, would rather err on the side of personal freedom.

But the shared public space requires protection -- protection from you, if you are too ignorant, too selfish or too careless to see that it degrades us all and lowers the quality of life for everyone when you blow your smoke at those of us who wish not to breathe it in.

Or refuse to clean up after your pets.

Or gab loudly and rudely on your cell phones.

Or spit. (For the love of Mike, what is with the spitting people?)

The arguments over whether the research really shows a connection between secondhand smoke and cancer are completely beside the point.

Most of us don't smoke. Those of you who do can do it at home to your heart's content. What you can no longer do, as of Jan. 1, 2008, is sit at the bar coolly puffing away, while you enigmatically and endlessly rearrange your pack and your lighter and your ashtray, squinting at your reflection in the bar mirror, admiring yourselves, noting your undeniable resemblance to a (pick one) famous author/famous artist/famous actor/famous musician.

While this is truly tragic, and will certainly make for a lot less cinematic posing at local watering holes, it's hardly reason enough for the rest of us to go home stinking like an overflowing ashtray when all we wanted to do was enjoy a glass of wine and a nice risotto.

The nanny state is not to blame for the fact that the rest of us are sick of your thoughtlessness.