

Smoking or non? City asks bars to explain

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CHARLESTON, S.C. | What started out as a proposal to ban smoking in Charleston's restaurants is now a suggestion to require restaurants to post their smoking policies, just as they post health department ratings.

Last year, hundreds of people turned out for a public hearing on a proposal that would have banned smoking in most public places in the city.

But the City Council tabled the idea and appointed a committee to study the matter.

A subcommittee of that panel is now proposing there be no new restrictions on smoking but that restaurants post notices telling patrons how smoky it is inside.

The proposal also suggests the city provide incentives for restaurants that are smoke-free or install better ventilation equipment. The incentives have not been specified.

The notices would give people a way to tell whether the restaurant is smoke-free or if smoking is allowed, said the committee's chairman Sean Keefer.

"There are smoke-free restaurants and bars in Charleston, but I'm not aware of any list," he said.

"I think you had folks in the health care community and folks in the restaurant and bar community decide we needed some sort of compromise in order to move forward," said Dean Riegel, the president of an occupational health business who heads the subcommittee.

"I would say the restaurant and bar owners on the subcommittee have embraced the proposal," he said.

City Council has the final say on whether there will be any new smoking rules.

Five years ago, a similar committee proposed a ban on smoking in all public places, but the idea was never passed by the City Council.

Enforce this law? Lotsa luck

About the same time *King & King* was making our fair city famous for something other than azaleas and hurricanes, a less-noticed morality tale was unfolding. A local officer of the state informed a woman who moved here about a month ago from New York that North Carolina would not allow her into its probation program because she was breaking the law: Though unmarried, she was living with a man.

Of course, native North Carolinians would never do a thing like that, because it is a crime.

Specifically, it is a Class 2 misdemeanor that could get you 60 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine if it were enforced, which it almost never is. Law-enforcement officers would be so busy that they'd never be able to catch murderers, armed robbers and litter bugs. In New Hanover County alone, census-takers found close to 6,000 people breaking the law in 2000.

This latest suspect and her co-suspect can either move to another state where such behavior is legal, or split up (they have three children), or get married.

But they say they don't want to do any of those things. They say they like their lives the way they are. And they are not alone.

An increasing number of Americans have made such arrangements, which long have been common in barbarous lands such as Old Europe. If there is a serious threat to the popularity of marriage in this country, it comes from these unclerghed heterosexuals, not from the same-sex couples whose desire for equal rights is generating amazement and outrage in some quarters.

By the way, though it is a crime for unmarried men and women to live together as man and wife in North Carolina, it appears to be perfectly legal for the same people to commit aggravated whoopee so long as they don't make a habit of it.

You have two weeks to make the most of it. Up until then, everything's legal. After that, it's habitual, and thus a crime.

To put it another way, the state of North Carolina encourages one-night stands and semi-brief flings, but criminalizes the formation of stable households of unmarried people, whatever their sexual preference. Better prodigious promiscuity than unlawful domesticity.

Folks from other places might find these statutes inconsistent and subversive of social stability. Of course, they are not.

They represent our Honorables' innovative approach to sin: You are entitled to fool around (with people of the opposite sex) if you limit yourself to one beau every two weeks. Stick to one for longer than that, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

Yet some say our lawmakers lack subtlety and nuance.

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