

PACIFICA / Council considers law to cleanse waterfront of ditched cigarettes / Smoking could be prohibited at all city beaches, fishing pier

Diana Walsh, Chronicle Staff Writer Published 4:00 am, Wednesday, July 5, 2006



Chronicle / Michael Macor

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smokingban_011_mac.jpg A water-logging pack of smokes, covered with sand, lies on the Linda Mar Beach in Pacific. Pacifica, Ca., Looks like it may join a growing number of communities that are banning smoking on their public beaches. Event in, Pacifica, Ca, on 7/1/06. Photo by: Michael Macor / San Francisco Chronicle Mandatory credit for Photographer and San Francisco Chronicle / Magazines Out

It's a smoking ban that has nothing to do with the smoke: The City Council in Pacifica wants to outlaw smoking on all city beaches and a popular fishing pier.

But unlike other smoking bans, this one is aimed squarely at cigarette butts and not the dangers of secondhand smoke.

"This is not a no-smoking issue," said Mari Brumm-Merrill, director of parks, beaches and recreation in Pacifica. "We are concerned about what (cigarette butts) are doing to the wetlands we've restored."

The cities of Santa Cruz, **Carmel**, Monterey and scores of towns in Southern California have passed similar bans on beaches, but to the delight of environmentalists -- and the dismay of some salty fishermen -- Pacifica is believed to be the first in the Bay Area to be heading toward a total waterfront ban on cigarettes.

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Pacifica resident Susan Danielson says she hopes her hometown will be the first of many in the Bay Area to adopt a smoking ban on the water's edge and start people thinking about sandy beaches as a precious resource, not giant ashtrays.

"I think we are going to see this as the norm and the standard for our beaches," said Danielson, who spearheaded the effort for Pacifica's ban and is hoping officials in San Mateo County, and ultimately the state, will follow with their own law prohibiting smoking at more than a dozen other beaches.

Danielson, who led San Mateo County's annual coastal cleanup for the past two years, says that since she began cleaning beaches five years ago, she and other volunteers have picked up thousands of butts from the sand.

Pacifica's four beaches and fishing pier, while not particularly large, have always ranked at the top for cigarette litter. On four separate cleanups at Pacifica's Linda Mar Beach, volunteers picked up more than 1,200 butts on three occasions and more than 900 on the fourth. A one-day cleanup on the city's fishing pier earlier this year netted 920 butts, according to Danielson.

"Cigarette butts are the No. 1 leading litter out there," said Danielson. "The cities in San Mateo County weren't looking at butt litter, and we knew they would once we started calling their attention to it."

In early 2005, Danielson, armed with a small grant, enlisted the help of a group of students at the **College** of San Mateo and established a grassroots organization called Citizens for Clean Open Spaces. Their goal is to get local governments to create policies that ensure safe and clean beaches. Most of the beaches in the county are managed by either the state or the county, and Danielson decided to start with Pacifica, which manages a fishing pier and four beaches.

In November, armed with surveys, statistics and the effects of cigarettes on the environment, Danielson and her group of students went to the City Council and asked for the ban on smoking.

Pacifica officials said the presentation, which included ample statistics and bags full of butts, shed light on a problem that had been around for years. The council voted 4-0 last week to direct city staff to prepare a draft ordinance for

consideration.

Pacifica's city attorney is now drafting legislation for a permanent ban that the council is expected to handily pass in the next few months.

Pacifica's mayor, Sue Digre, said the city won't have police officers trolling the beaches or pier for violators. Instead, the ordinance will rely on public awareness and self-policing, much like dog owners who clean up after their pets.

"I don't think we're going to have a butt-free beach in a week ... but in time this is going to happen from people to people," she said. "We aren't going to need a policeman. ... It's more of a peer pressure and self-conscious thing. It's going to be self-regulating."

Although scores of people voiced their unhappiness with a ban last year on beach bonfires, so far, no one has turned up at City Hall to complain about the smoking ban, city officials said.

Perhaps they were all too busy fishing?

Scores of fishermen, when asked what they thought about the ban, disagreed with the council's move, but couldn't be bothered fighting City Hall.

"I think it's a typical overreaction and ineffectual solution to a problem," said Craig Iwamoto of Pacifica. "Putting out ashtrays would be so much better. It comes down to punishing all for the actions of a few."

David Hall said that even if the law is passed, the city doesn't have the resources to enforce it and would be better off simply spending money on signs that politely ask smokers to clean up after themselves.

"It would be far more effective," said Hall, adding that he never puts a cigarette butt anywhere but in his pocket or the trash.

Bob Saenz, who used to smoke three packs a day until quitting 12 years ago, was one of just a handful of fishermen who backed the ban.

"Can you imagine the filters going into the ocean? That's pretty toxic, and it's not very healthy," Saenz said. "Fishing is more than relaxing. You don't need to smoke and fish at the same time."

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