

Tobacco Free: Model of community organizing

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tobacco companies cause — pollution, health hazards, fires.”

The group helped write policy language for the ordinance and got Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi to sponsor it, but, because of potential legal challenges, it was never introduced.

The young people took it well, Qurashi said. “It was a good learning lesson regarding public policy and politics in San Francisco. They were proud about educating the community on the issue, building their professional skills and working on a social justice issue.”

LGBT COMMUNITY TARGETED

Another Tobacco Free Project grantee is The Last Drag, a program of CLASH (Coalition of Lavender-Americans on Smoking & Health). The Last Drag offers the LGBT community free, seven-session smoking-cessation classes four times a year.

LGBT Tobacco Education Partnership project Director Bob Gordon calls tobacco control work “a huge challenge” in the gay community, which, he says, is thought to have more deaths related to tobacco than to AIDS, suicide and auto accidents combined.

One mid-1990s study in California found that people in the LGBT community smoke much more than the general population, with LGBT women smoking three times more than all women. Gordon says the tobacco industry has been persistently targeting gays since the early 1990s, through giveaways and advertising — he has drawn

from tobacco companies.

“There are at least 50 of these officials statewide,” Gordon said. “As of June, 36 had signed. We think that’s a great response.”

Gordon insists that despite all his tobacco control work, he’s not for prohibiting smoking when it doesn’t affect the health of others. “We need empathy for people who are struggling to stop smoking,” he said. “But I do want the tobacco companies regulated and prohibited from false advertising. The real problem is people starting to smoke and getting addicted — which only takes about 100 cigarettes.”

PRICE HELPS CONTROL SMOKING

Late in the 1980s, when tobacco companies were just starting to feel the pinch of government control, cigarettes cost around \$1.50 a pack. In San Francisco, now expect to pay \$6 to \$7 a pack, the result of inflation and state and federal taxes.

Price helps control smoking. The National Center for Biotechnology Information, which tracks human health and disease, found that in the first decade after Prop. 99 passed, the incidence of lung cancer in the San Francisco-Oakland area dropped 6%; statewide, that translated to 11,000 fewer cases of the deadly disease.

After President Obama signed a law raising the federal tax on cigarettes from 39¢ to \$1.01 in February, the California Department of Public Health’s Tobacco Control Program estimated that 172,000 youth in the state wouldn’t start smoking because of the hike and 118,000 adult smokers would quit.

Until the end of the century and the Master Settlement Agreement, tobacco taxes funded the lion’s share of anti-smoking efforts nationwide. Prop. 99’s 25¢ tax increase made California the state with the highest tobacco tax, but it since has slipped to No. 30. In June, the state was poised to raise the tax to \$1.50 a pack, though the bill was mired in the annual budget fracas. If approved, California would move back up the list to No. 5.

Among the states, only Utah has a lower smoking rate than California. Adult smoking in San Francisco dropped from 20% in 1996 to 14% in 2005, the most recent statistics available, according to a state Department of Health Services tobacco survey. That’s the good news.

But success has made California a ripe target for tobacco industry promotions, and that’s the bad news. The Tobacco Free Project’s recent 10-year report says that in 2003, tobacco companies spent 20 times more promoting its products in the state than the state spent on tobacco control — \$70 million vs. \$3.4 million.

Added to this is the irony that fewer people smoking reduces the revenue for tobacco control. The city’s Prop. 99 allocation has dropped steadily — from \$1.6 million in 1989-90 down to \$551,386 for fiscal 2008-09. The decrease was initially caused by funds being diverted; now it’s because people are smoking less, Hrushow says. “We did have our [Prop. 99] funding restored in 1998-99. In the meantime, as smoking rates decline, the tobacco tax money has declined, too.”

The tax and settlement revenues have allowed the Tobacco Free Project and the coalition to achieve stunning successes, but while San Francisco has a reputation for leading trends, it’s behind the curve when it comes to regulating secondhand smoke.

Berkeley made all its public transportation smoke-free in 1948, 12 years after Milwaukee, which was first in 1936. Berkeley also became the first California city to limit smoking in public buildings, while San Luis Obispo was the first city in the world to completely ban smoking in public buildings, in 1990. The City Council of Belmont in March prohibited smoking everywhere in the city except detached single-family homes.

Oakland’s retail tobacco licensing fee of \$1,500 is the nation’s highest. It’s also the only California city that requires landlords and condo sellers to tell prospective residents where they can and can’t smoke in buildings.

For its efforts, Oakland was the highest-scoring Bay Area city in the American Lung Association’s 2008 report card, a nationwide tally of how well municipalities are doing with anti-tobacco laws. Oakland got a B.

“San Francisco got a C, but that was up from an F the year before,” says Hrushow. “We’re definitely behind on regulating secondhand smoke in outdoor areas and in housing, but we are a leader in controlling the availability of tobacco products, and in opposing tobacco sponsorship.”

WIN SOME, LOSE SOME

Some tobacco battles are more easily won than others. The ordinance requiring tobacco sellers to get a permit took five years to enact. Coalition members have been working since early 2007 on the secondhand smoke legislation.

“We’ve had 24 slightly altered versions of the legislation that’s now pending with the supervisors,” Hrushow says. “They were working documents, adjusted just a little.”

She expresses frustration with the secondhand smoke ordinance, whose provisions, complex and wide-ranging, are demanding patience among advocates. “It is a challenge,” she says.

In the give and take of legislating, compromises are essential, and the coalition has agreed to amend several provisions: In response to concerns from the Golden Gate Restaurant Association, it has changed the provision that bans smoking within 20 feet of private, nonresidential building entrances, exits and operable windows to allowing smoking only at the curb outside those buildings, and, if there’s no curb — think plazas, ports, alleys — 15 feet from the entries.

In response to the Small Business Commission, the coalition also agreed that smoking will be allowed in tobacco shops and owner-operated bars that opened before the ordinance is adopted. The grandfathering in, however, applies only to bars and tobacco shops that aren’t in mixed-use residential and commercial buildings.

And in response to tenant rights advocates who worry that making it illegal to smoke in common areas of multiunit residences might give landlords an easy excuse to evict unwanted renters, the coalition added the language, “Violation of any part of the article is not a cause for eviction.”

The groundwork for the ban on selling tobacco products in pharmacies also took years to develop, but it was more focused. And once laid on the legislative table, it flew through in four months.

Introduced by Mayor Newsom in April 2008 and carried by then-Supervisor Aaron Peskin, the drugstore ban was heard at the Health Commission and the City Operations Committee meeting in July, passed by the full board Aug. 5 and signed into law Aug. 8. Walgreens cried foul to the ordinance and filed suit to stop it, claiming the ordinance favored pharmacies in groceries and big box stores, which are exempt, then a Superior Court judge dismissed the suit in December. Walgreens is appealing.

The pharmacy ordinance had heavy support that helped it move through so quickly, said Gordon. “It’s what’s ‘in’ socially, the UCSF School of Pharmacy had been urging it for years, plus it had the mayor behind it. It was a major coup for the mayor — governing the first city that disallows selling cigarettes in pharmacies.”

MORE WORK TO DO

The tobacco struggles are far from over. Many are hailing Congress’ June passage of SB 892, giving the FDA broad control over tobacco manufacturing, marketing and distribution, as a major nail in the industry’s coffin. AP reported that Sen. Ted Kennedy called it “a lifesaving act for the millions of

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHINESE PROGRESSIVE ASSOCIATION

Youth in Chinese
Progressive Association’s CPAT program (Chinese Power Against Tobacco) meet and work on community organizing issues.

ers full of sample magazines, and on his computer he’s bookmarked trinketsandtrash.org, a Website that archives thousands of images of tobacco industry marketing materials for all populations, including LGBT.

Gordon, formerly a staff member of the Tobacco Free Project, had a background in advertising that gives him insight on getting people to buy a product or a message. “The psychology of it comes down to finding common ground for what you’re selling and the [audience’s] self-interest. With gays, I’ve learned that you can’t just say ‘don’t smoke’ — we’ve been told so many ‘no’s’ over the years, as advocates we have to work from a positive angle, with a concise, simple, single message. Our job is to make science and health easy to understand.”

Last year, to advocate for the ordinance that bans cigarette sales in pharmacies, the LGBT Partnership polled people at the Castro Street Fair, where 87% said they’d support the ban; gathered petition signatures; and created a clever bus poster and fact card handout. Above the image of syrup being poured into a spoon, it said, “To help a persistent cough go to aisle 8.” Above a photo of a burning cigarette with a long ash: “To get a persistent cough go to aisle 14.” The final message on a stark black background: “Cigarettes and pharmacies don’t mix.”

This year’s LGBT Partnership campaign started as a statewide effort and has spread to the nation: getting LGBT elected officials to pledge that they won’t take contributions