

Is it so hard to say you were wrong?
Published in the Calgary *Herald* July 26, 2006
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NOTE: This article was published when the motion to pull back the non-smoking bylaw by a year was in some doubt. Aldermen did in fact pull it back, with exactly the compromise we suggest below.

On Monday, six aldermen will bring forth a motion to pull back the date when Calgary public spaces go smoke-free by one year, from Jan. 1, 2008 to Jan. 1, 2007.

They need two more votes for their motion to pass, and there is no good reason to vote against it. In 2004, bucking the trend across North America, aldermen decided to delay outlawing smoking in restaurants and bars for four years.

The timing was for political reasons. A January 2008 date would, it was then thought, get the politicians through two elections. The year 2008 was too far away to be an issue in the 2004 election.

By the time the 2007 election rolls around, politicians will be able to say "it's just around the corner" to supporters and "we gave you an extra four years of profit" to bar and casino owners. These folks, in a surprising coincidence, can be significant political donors to a municipal campaign (a random page of the mayor's 24-page finance disclosure statement shows nearly \$5,000 in donations from restaurants and bars).

By taking this decision, council doomed many more people like Heather Crowe, the waitress who never smoked, to illness and, yes, even death. Calgary is the only major Canadian city where you can still light up in a restaurant. And they wrote legislation that forces you, if on a patio, to go inside for your smoke break.

It gets better.

Just before the 2004 election, all candidates were surveyed on accelerating the move to smoke-free status. Nearly all were in favour of a ban much earlier than January 2008. Only 10 of 49 candidates did not respond, but this included three incumbents and the mayor.

The six now co-sponsoring the bill -- Bob Hawkesworth, Craig Burrows, Druh Farrell, Madeline King, Joe Ceci and Diane Colley-Urquhart -- suggested they favour moving the ban forward to 2005 or 2006.

Burrows equivocated, but expressed support for the majority of restaurants being smoke-free. In addition, Ald. Ray Jones suggested he would move back the date if a majority of Calgarians supported it -- something that is supported by letters to the editor and the 12,000-name petition being presented to council.

So, we should be at seven votes: one to go. Of the remaining alderman, only Ric McIver seemed hostile to the idea, saying Smoke-Free Calgary "has consistently misrepresented the data."

Uh, OK. In any case, McIver voted to make Olympic Plaza smoke-free, so perhaps he has changed his mind.

Ald. Dale Hodges suggested he could be convinced, if non-profits would not lose casino income and if he saw studies showing that it would not harm business. Both of his conditions can be met -- studies from every single city where a ban has been applied show that bars and restaurants quickly return to normal levels of business after a ban, as long as the ban is consistently applied. Given the enormous growth in casinos, I think non-profits would be safe (and council could exempt casinos if they must).

The other aldermen -- Gord Lowe, Helene Larocque, Andre Chabot, Barry Erskine and Linda Fox-Mellway -- and the mayor did not respond to the survey.

There are two major arguments to keep the current timeline in place: that businesses have invested an enormous amount in smoking rooms, and that council should not backtrack on earlier decisions. Both arguments are, pardon the pun, smoke and mirrors.

First, if council is really concerned about the tiny handful of restaurants that have installed smoking rooms, not making back their investment in the past three years, they can grandfather everyone who had a smoking room on July 1 and give them an extra

year. Or, they can compensate them for the depreciated value of their rooms. I guarantee this would be a tiny number.

Second, just because a wrong decision is made, it doesn't mean it can't ever be changed. Imagine if parliamentarians had said, "Yes, the Chinese Head Tax is wrong, but you know, people have been saving up to pay it for years. Can't change the rules now."

Or "yes, the NEP has caused enormous damage, but it would look bad if we admitted we were wrong."

The role of politicians is to lead, which sometimes means admitting when you're wrong.

Imposing a four-year waiting period was wrong in 2004, and voting to keep it would be wrong now. Here's hoping councillors will understand that.

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