

NYC to try banning smoking in parks and at beaches

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Published: September 16, 2010, 9:18 AM

NEW YORK (AP) - New York City is pursuing a tough new policy that would shoo smokers out of public parks, beaches and even the heart of Times Square - one of the most ambitious outdoor anti-tobacco efforts in the nation.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration and city lawmakers announced Wednesday that they will pursue a broad extension of the city's smoking ban to 1,700 parks and 14 miles of public beaches, plus boardwalks, marinas and pedestrian plazas.

That would mean no smoking in Central Park, no lighting up on the Coney Island boardwalk and putting the cigarettes away if you're lounging on the traffic-free pedestrian plazas in Times Square and Herald Square.

"When New Yorkers and visitors to our city go to the parks and beaches for fresh air, there will actually be fresh air for them to breathe," Bloomberg said at a City Hall news conference.

States and cities from Maine to California have banned smoking in public parks and beaches, but New York is pursuing an especially wide-reaching urban ban. While hundreds of municipalities have outdoor no-smoking laws, the largest city in the nation is seeking to force thousands of acres of parkland as well as some busy city blocks to go smoke-free.

By including pedestrian plazas, the Bloomberg administration is venturing into territory most anti-tobacco bans leave alone: smoking on the street.

The boundaries of the plazas, in most cases, are sidewalks, bike lanes and street corners. If the law passes, it would be easy for a smoker to drift from the sidewalk, where smoking is still allowed, into a plaza, where it is not, without realizing.

Lawmakers said the goal is to keep people from smoking inside the plazas, not to trick smokers into getting ticketed.

"The point of this bill isn't 'Gotcha,'" said City Council Speaker Christine Quinn. "Our goal is not to get a gentleman or a lady who's walking across the street."

The city banned smoking in bars and restaurants in 2003. Smokers, long accustomed to being told they are not welcome, shrugged off the news of a possible outdoor ban Wednesday.

Gene Buelow, who stopped for a smoke in a Times Square pedestrian plaza, said it "wouldn't bother me a bit."

"I don't even like smoking around people who don't smoke," he said. "And the people who gave it up don't want smokers around them."

"It's a good idea," said Jason Perez, a restaurant worker smoking at an outdoor table in the plaza. "I'm trying to quit myself."

A smokers' rights group, NYC Citizens Lobbying Against Smoker Harassment, recently posted a video on its website protesting the idea. The group's founder, Audrey Silk, argues that smoke dissipates quickly outdoors, where "there's room for everybody and nobody will be affected."

Officials said they are basing the proposed law on claims that even brief exposure to secondhand smoke can pose health risks.

They cited a May 2007 Stanford University study that found a person sitting within three feet of a smoker outdoors can be exposed to levels of secondhand smoke similar to indoor levels.

The proposed law, which must go through the City Council, would give the parks department the power to slap violators with quality-of-life summonses, which are tickets for minor offenses like panhandling or public urination. Fines can go as high as \$250; the city said smoking summonses likely would be around \$50.

Council members plan to introduce the anti-smoking bill Thursday. It has to go through committee hearings before the full 51-member council can vote.

Associated Press writer Cristian Salazar contributed to this report.