

Point Counter Point



Should hookah bars be snuffed out in Illinois?

“ Yes. The Smoke Free Illinois Act does not in any way excuse hookah bars from this law. ”

“ No. Would someone who does not want to be exposed to smoke go to a hookah bar? ”



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Lately, every time I look around to scrutinize the space I'm using I notice numerous 'No Smoking' signs that work in accordance with the ambitious Smoke Free Illinois Act.

The act became a law on January 1 last year and since then more and more businesses had to prohibit smoking and warn everyone by posting signs that it is only allowed 15 feet or more away from the entrance. That, to me sounds quite reasonable and fair to those people who like to enjoy healthy, untainted air and might be disturbed by somebody else's habit.

The SFI Act does not, in any way, excuse hookah bars from this law. This really has proved problematic and both business owners and hookah fans seem perplexed. But if one cannot overturn the law, one has to come up with alternatives and there are some of those available.

Many hookah bars can start, and have started, categorizing themselves as tobacco retail stores that earn 80 percent of its gross revenue from the sale of loose tobacco. Whether a hookah bar closes down or circumvents the law and stays open, however, is not really of primal importance.

What should matter most is how we manage our own health and whether we decide to spend the night bathing in carcinogenic fumes, or spend it in a healthier, cleaner and therefore often more pleasant environment. According to www.cancer.org, hookah smoke contains tar, which is made up of more than 4,000 chemicals, including over 60 known to cause cancer.

It also contains the poisonous gases nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide, and while some people claim that the water in the hookah is able to clean out the chemicals, scientists and doctors reject that theory. Although the chemicals in tobacco might help us loosen up, they will not do so without heavily charging our health, and we might never be able to pay the debt that we thus accumulate.

The pleasure of inhaling hookah smoke is, to my mind, simply not worth the physical, mental and economic strain that it frequently results in. If our purpose of visiting hookah bars truly is smoking a water pipe, then we might be able to purchase one and use it on our own accord.

If we do that, let us at least be informed that the World Health Organization reports that an hour of hookah smoking is equivalent to a 100 to 200 times the volume of a regular cigarette. The Illinois law laid out guidelines to help us lead a healthy lifestyle, but the ultimate choice is ours.

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Would someone who is lactose intolerant go to Baskin Robbins? No. Would someone who does not want to be exposed to smoke go to a hookah bar? No. The indoor smoking ban was enacted in part to protect patrons that did not wish to be subjected to the harmful toxins of tobacco smoke. So why is it that Illinois law has recently applied the indoor smoking ban to a building specifically designated for smokers?

State law permits smoking in hookah lounges and retail tobacco stores as long as the businesses do not encompass a restaurant or liquor license and they get 80 percent of their revenue from the sale of tobacco or smoking-related products. However, individual cities are allowed to make the laws stricter if they so choose. The villages of Worth and Palos Hills have done just that in closing popular lounges such as Friends, Havana Café and Royale Lounge.

Town officials claim that the new laws are just a means to further protect citizens. Again, assuming only smokers will frequent these locations I ask why are they harmful to non-smokers? To this, lawmakers say that since most of the buildings are directly located next to other establishments, the smoke can seep into ventilation and contaminate adjacent facilities, though none of these businesses have lodged formal complaints.

By that reasoning residential areas should have a smoking ban so as not to expose non-smoking neighbors to any molecule of bad air that could possibly escape from their homes and out into the poor, innocent world. Smoking is not illegal, so why do laws about it make smokers out to be criminals?

There are also complaints of lenient policies on underage patrons entering lounges and participating in hookah smoking. The simple solution to that problem is to enforce carding policies as strict as those applied to the consumption of alcoholic beverages rather than shut down the bars as a whole.

On that note, hookah bars were a prevalent hang out for the 18-20 year-old crowd. It gave them a place to go during those frustrating years of adulthood that still don't permit going out to bars. Instead of turning to illegal and often dangerous means of drinking, these young people could congregate in a fun, yet alcohol free environment.

Hookah bars are a relaxing and entertaining alternate to just sitting around in somebody's basement. They are also a culturally diverse place to meet people. Driving through Worth and Palos Hills one does not really see anything too different from other suburbs: banks, fast food places, grocery stores, but hookah bars give an exotic flair to otherwise cookie cutter towns. Unfortunately as of Jan. 1 these towns have lost that flair, not to mention a great deal of local revenue.

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