

SLUG: SMOKING BAN**Contact: John Dillon, journalism faculty, jad53@psu.edu****By Pearly Huang****Penn State journalism student**

UNIVERSITY PARK -- Cigarettes are being snuffed out on college campuses across the country, but at Penn State University, despite anti-smoking activists' pleas for a smoke-free campus, students are still lighting up.

While the health risks of smoking are well-known, less well-known is that smoking on campus is costing students money: Somebody has to pick up those butts.

"From the OPP's point of view, [cigarette smoking] is a litter problem and a cost factor," said Paul Ruskin, communications coordinator for the Office of Physical Plant.

According to Ruskin, it costs the university about \$200,000 a year to clean up cigarette butts. The black, bulbous, free-standing structures for butt disposal outside buildings alone cost \$300 each.

The OPP recently purchased two specialized cigarette butt-removal machines that cost about \$50,000 each. The machines, Ruskin said, are similar to lawn mowers with a vacuum-like hose that suctions up butts from the campus' 23 miles of sidewalk and 31 miles of roads.

Since there are only two machines manual labor is still needed for cigarette removal, using more of the OPP's time and resources that, Ruskin, said, could be used elsewhere.

But Ruskin said the OPP tries to be light-handed with the situation and doesn't want to "over-regulate."

"We are the stewards of UP (University Park)," he said. "We try to keep [campus] as clean as we can."

While Ruskin and the OPP may be concerned with the sanitation and aesthetics of smoking on campus, Linda LaSalle, associate director of educational services at the University Health Center, is concerned with health and environmental issues.

LaSalle is also the adviser for Project Smokeless, a student-led health advocacy group promoting a smoke-free environment on campus. Project Smokeless, originally called Students for Tobacco Awareness, was formed in 2001 with funds from Centre County's share of the state attorneys generals' settlement with the big tobacco companies.

LaSalle said smoking is a "public concern," and secondhand smoke harms not only health but also the environment because of the release of carbon monoxide in the air.

Last year Project Smokeless joined with two other campus groups and 100 other college students from across the state to rally for Clean Indoor Air legislation being debated by the legislature. On June 13, 2008, Gov. Ed Rendell signed the Clean Indoor Air Act prohibiting smoking in most public areas and workplaces.

A policy of smoke-free campuses is in place for all state schools in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. But since Penn State is not a state-owned school, it does not fall under this policy.

LaSalle said she hopes this will change.

“Of the Big Ten schools [we] have the most liberal smoking policies – we’re at the bottom of the list,” LaSalle said, noting that Michigan State has plans to go “totally smoke-free” by 2011.

Penn State’s policy prohibits smoking in any university building. As for smoking outdoors, smokers are asked to keep a “reasonable” distance, a term that LaSalle said is too vague and subjective.

Project Smokeless met with Vice President for Student Affairs Damon Sims in January with the hope of reforming the smoking policies.

Sims recommended the group get support from student representation groups such as the Association of Residence Hall Students, the Council of Commonwealth Student Governments and the University Park Undergraduate Association, and the Graduate Students Association.

Students who are smokers have a lot to say on the issue.

“I think it’s a wrong way of combating [smoking],” said Nick Williams, an international undergraduate student whose native London recently adopted a smoke-free policy for enclosed public places. “I don’t think one subgroup should be victimized.”

“I’m not going to go all the way downtown just to have a smoke – especially if I just want to smoke in between classes,” said Walt Burham, a junior who smokes about a pack a day. He started smoking regularly at age 15 because of “friends and peer pressure,” he said, but “now, it’s just something to do.”

Burham has tried to quit a few times. “School gets to me, and I’m, like, forget it, I need a cigarette. I feel like it [the ban] wouldn’t last long, -- and what are they going to do? Expel me if I have a smoke? Fine, let them expel me.”

Burham agreed with policies banning smoking indoors but not outdoors. “I feel like the regular air has tons of bad stuff anyway” and smokers can’t be contributing that much more harm, he said.

Burham’s companion, junior Mary Herbert, replied, “Well, I guess you don’t have asthma then.” Herbert said she avoids trailing behind smokers on campus because their smoke aggravates her condition, and she is glad most bars and clubs downtown has smoke-free policies.

The policy for such establishments is that if the venue makes more than 20 percent of sales from food, smoking is prohibited inside.

According to a report compiled by the American Nonsmokers’ Rights Foundation, there are “at least 49 100 percent smoke-free campuses with minor exemptions for remote outdoor areas.” The report also said there are “at least 305 100 percent smoke-free campuses with no exemptions.”