

The Huntsville Times

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Smoking & Madison

City leaders set a course to debate this hot issue responsibly

The cities of Huntsville and Madison don't mind drawing lines between them. Each treasures its past and present; each looks to unique futures. And each has competed fiercely in recent years over such matters as annexing lucrative commercial property.

But, demographically and geographically, the two cities aren't far apart. Social and governmental issues that affect one also affect the other. And where one goes, the other, eventually, often follows.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Madison City Council will begin a process next month to take that city where Huntsville has gone before — toward restrictions on smoking in public places.

City Councilman Mark Russell led the charge in Huntsville. And, after much debate — some of it very heated — the Rocket City adopted a compromise law that gives restaurant owners a choice: They can forbid smoking on their premises or they can allow it and exclude employees and customers under the age of 19.

In Madison, veteran City Councilwoman Cynthia McCollum is promoting the adoption of some kind of public smoking restrictions. And, to her credit, she has proposed a way to address this issue that the most zealous partisan on either side of the issue has to say is fair.

She wants both public health and smokers' rights advocates to present arguments to the Madison City Council. She wants at least one public hearing on the

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issue. Then, and only then, does she want the City Council to act.

The public health concerns that have inspired McCollum are real ones. Since

Huntsville adopted its ordinance, new evidence has shown that secondhand smoke is more perilous than originally thought. And more and more local governments have stepped forward to protect non-smokers, who are now far in the majority of Americans, from those who choose to smoke.

What type of ordinance, if any, Madison adopts will depend on the presentations by the interest groups, the passion of the citizens and the decisions of the City Council members.

Whether the time has come for Madison to step forward on this issue remains in question.

What's virtually assured, though, is that if Madison doesn't adopt an ordinance now, it will eventually. Just as it is inevitable that at some point Huntsville will join other cities across the nation in making its ordinance more restrictive, not less.

All that's yet to play out. What's important now is that McCollum has established a playing field for debate that is fair to all parties.

Yes, as she noted, this is an emotional topic for many people. That doesn't mean it can't be addressed civilly and democratically. And the leaders of Madison have positioned themselves to do that.

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