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COMMENTARY

Bar owners want to clear the air about effect of smoking ban

By MIKE HENDRICKS
The Kansas City Star

I've got Bill Nigro on the phone. It's almost two weeks since the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City released a study that, in so many words, called him a big, fat liar.

Nigro is still fuming.

"All those people on that board should be ashamed of themselves!" he says. "I think that their whole study was flawed!"

The health care foundation actually issued two studies regarding Kansas City's 19-month-old ban on smoking in bars and restaurants.

The first report stated the obvious: Air quality in KC bars and restaurant is a whole lot better now than it was before the ban.

Yet the foundation also had the audacity to claim in a companion report that Nigro and his fellow bar owners are blowing smoke of another kind when they claim the ban is hurting their businesses.

The "findings clearly counter tobacco industry and hospitality sector claims that Kansas City's comprehensive smoke-free policy ... has had a negative economic impact on restaurants and bars," concluded a study commissioned by the health care foundation. "Instead, the ... policy has had no impact on restaurant and bar business. "

To which bar owners such as Kevin McGraw of the News Room, 3740 Broadway, said "bull."

"The smoking ban just killed us," McGraw said. His daytime clientele practically disappeared after the ban took effect in June 2008.

"A lot of them just buy a six-pack at Gomer's and go home and smoke," he said.

McGraw's nighttime business is off to the point he had to lay off a waitress.

"A single mom with a 4-year-old kid — I felt horrible."

I heard similar stories this week from a half-dozen other bar owners. Granted, the recession has taken its toll. And true, overall sales tax figures may, indeed, back up the foundation's contention that the ban has had no effect in the aggregate.

But to say there was "no impact on restaurant and bar business" is simply not true, according to members of Nigro's Kansas City Business Rights Coalition.

"We lost 11.4 percent of our business right off the bat, and we have never recovered that original 11.4 percent," said Kevin Barnes, owner of Ward Parkway Lanes.

Others report declines of up to 30 percent.

Naturally, no one expects the KC smoking ban to go away. The message Nigro's group wants to impress on candidates attending City Council and mayoral screenings this week and next is that they deserve a fair shake by:

A: Making the casinos' exemption to the smoking ban go away.

B: Working to get a statewide ban in Missouri — like the one in Kansas — so the bar owner in Kansas City, North, won't lose customers to a tavern three blocks away in Gladstone, where smoking is still allowed.

"All we want is a level playing field," said Jim Hess, owner of Dave's Stagecoach Inn in Westport.

That and a little more honesty.

"Just tell it like it is," he said. "It has affected us."



FRED BLOCHER

Jim Hess, who owns Dave's Stagecoach Inn in Westport, is among bar and restaurant owners who don't think much of Kansas City's no-smoking law that took effect two years ago. "All we want is a level playing field," he said.

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