

The path to Colorado's future should not include a return to the time smoking was allowed publicly

By Pete Bialick

Colorado lawmakers are considering an idea that will decide whether to make public health progress or move backwards, as this year's legislative session winds down.

At issue is House Bill 1258, a bill in the Colorado legislature to allow marijuana-tasting rooms where buyers can consume edibles and marijuana-infused products, which includes vaping marijuana. This legislation is being touted as an opportunity for our burgeoning marijuana industry to improve customer experience and boost sales. It would seem that since Colorado voters approved the legalization of marijuana that many voters might approve a tasting room concept.

However, this plan for industry growth reminds us of the bad old days when smoking was allowed in most public places and workplaces. That's a plan for industry growth that the vast majority of us will not support. In fact a recent survey of 300 Colorado voters found that 86 percent agree that the Colorado Clean Indoor Air Act should apply to all types of smoking, including marijuana smoking and 76 percent said the law should also apply to vaping.

The Colorado Clean Indoor Air Act changed the way we all experience indoor places. For those who have grown up with smoke-free office buildings, restaurants and other public venues, it seems crazy that people once patronized restaurants that had a smoking and non-smoking section, often separated by a few feet and office buildings allowing smoking at individual desks. Like many laws that have changed the culture of the world around us, that law suffers from its own success and a lapse in time that has separated its results from past behaviors.

But those of us who fought for or supported the efforts to make sure we are not exposed to tobacco smoke simply by going out in public, working at a job or eating at a restaurant haven't forgotten what that act, and the decades-long effort to achieve it, meant to the health of our entire state.

When Colorado voters legalized marijuana with Amendment 64, they liked the provision that says marijuana cannot be consumed openly or in public places and in a manner that endangers others. That language is simple and clear. What's the danger? Well, recent scientific studies indicate that when people smoke or vape tobacco or marijuana; chemicals are emitted into the air that can be harmful to others.

Why should we care about allowing marijuana vaping or smoking in adult-only businesses we do not intend to patronize? We have learned in Colorado that businesses exempted from the smoking restrictions – hookah lounges and cigar bars – have generally been unable to completely contain the smoke their patrons emit from going into neighboring businesses or residences. There is no reason to believe that the chemicals released into the air through smoking or vaping will not harm our health just like the chemicals emitted by secondhand tobacco smoke have caused disease and death to thousands of people. In addition it is important to protect workers and people who must enter these establishments to deliver goods or perform services.

So, to keep our public and workplaces smoke and vape-free, we need to take up this fight. Even if we support legalized marijuana and even if we believe that industry's economic value must be weighed when considering its impact on our state. We have to place a higher priority on public health and the incredible public health gains of the past that we all have the luxury of enjoying as second nature today.

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Lung Association in Colorado, Children's Hospital Colorado, Tobacco-Free Kids, Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights, Group to Alleviate Smoking Pollution (GASP), Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials (CALPHO), and the Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation all oppose HB 1258.

Pete Bialick is the President of the Colorado Group to Alleviate Smoking Pollution (GASP)— a statewide nonprofit organization that has been advocating for smoke-free policies and educating the public about the dangers of secondhand smoke since 1977.