

A Breath of Fresh Air



The American Lung Association in California (ALAC) is working on a grant funded project to reduce outdoor secondhand smoke exposure in Chico parks with the goal of protecting families and park visitors from the dangerous chemicals found in drifting tobacco smoke.



Dear North State Parent,

We are students and peer mediators at Marsh Jr. High School who recently visited local parks in Chico to clean up cigarette butts. Cleaning up the toxic butts made us feel good. The butts do not care who picks them up, including small children. We felt like we were making the parks a safer place to be. Seeing the butts in the playgrounds and around small children makes us want to ban smoking in the parks.

It was sickening to see all the butts so close to where the children played. Secondhand smoke is just as toxic and dangerous as smoking. There are 4,000 chemicals found in cigarettes. The evidence of butts near the playgrounds proves children are exposed to secondhand smoke in our parks – this is unacceptable.

We have a duty to protect the children in our community – not to mention all of the non-smoking adults who do not appreciate secondhand smoke. We live in a day and age where we know the truths about tobacco and all of its harm. We no longer are tolerant or quiet about the effects of secondhand smoke or the toxic litter from tobacco. We want to take a stand in our community and tell people, "Not in our parks!"



2010-2011 Marsh Jr. High School Peer Mediators

The new report from the U.S. Surgeon General, released in January 2011, highlights why exposure to tobacco smoke is more than just a nuisance; it is a health threat:

“Exposure to tobacco smoke – even occasional smoking or secondhand smoke – causes immediate damage to your body that can lead to serious illness or death.”

“The chemicals in tobacco smoke reach your lungs quickly every time you inhale. Your blood then carries the toxicants to every organ in your body.”

“Inhaling even the smallest amount of tobacco smoke can also damage your DNA, which can lead to cancer.”

“Chemicals in tobacco smoke cause inflammation and cell damage, and can weaken the immune system.”

In addition, short-term exposure to tobacco smoke can trigger asthma attacks, migraines, and allergic reactions. With tobacco smoke clearly identified as a serious health concern, ALAC has partnered with community members and local students to encourage park leaders to designate Chico parks as smoke-free zones.

As the coordinator of Stroller Strides Chico, a fitness program for moms to do with their kids in lower Bidwell Park, I have daily encounters with people who light up their cigarettes on the main paths through the park. The tobacco smoke lingers where people walk with their children or pets. When people are going for a run or working out in the park and breathing a little more rapidly, taking a deep breath of secondhand smoke is not only unpleasant, but also unhealthy. I have also spoken to many other active community members who spend time in Lower Bidwell because it is a beautiful park but have to put up with running through pockets of smoke to do so.

Recently, outdoor tobacco smoke has been the focus of a number of scientific studies. For example, Stanford University scientist Neil Klepeis found that “a nonsmoker who is 1 or 2 feet away from a single burning cigarette can easily inhale pollution that is 10 times greater, on average, than background ‘clean’ levels.”

Cigarette butts also create unsightly litter in the parks that can wash into storm drains and end up in local waterways. Chemicals from non-biodegradable cigarette filters also leach into the soil.

A group of junior high school students in Chico recently volunteered to pick up cigarette butts in local parks as part of a school project in October and November. The students, known as K.L.E.A.N. or Kids Leading Everyone Against Nicotine, picked up the discarded cigarette butts from the grass, pavement and wood chips at seven Chico parks.

One easy solution to reduce outdoor secondhand smoke exposure and unsightly butt litter is to adopt a policy creating smoke-free parks in Chico. California state law has protected tot lots and play areas in parks from secondhand smoke for years. More than 100 California cities and counties are expanding those secondhand smoke protections to more outdoor areas, including entire parks.

For additional information, please contact the American Lung Association at (530) 897-4140.