

Chico's air quality given 'D'

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Hailey Vincent |

Chico was given a "D" grade by the American Lung Association.

Northern California was cited as not doing enough to prevent the use of tobacco and advocating smoke-free areas, according to a State of Tobacco Control report by the association. Other factors like agricultural dust, smog and pollution were also aspects in the low grade Chico received.

Chico would have received an "F" rating were it not for the recent change of the downtown plaza to a smoke-free area, said Shelly Brantley, project director for the American Lung Association.

Recent changes in policies regarding tobacco use show Chico's potential for improvement, Brantley said.

"Chico is one of the few communities that has a law against distributing free tobacco products," Brantley said. "They were targeting the bars and college students with a product that they know is addicting and harmful."

The law against distributing free tobacco products has been in place for three years now, she said.

Tobacco companies target college-aged people because it is the youngest crowd they can legally advertise to, said Christina Roberts, an American Lung Association health educator. The idea of "social smoking" is what tends to draw college students in.

More smoke-free areas around campus as well as in parks could help decrease the amount of students wanting to smoke, Brantley said.

The current policy, in place since 2002, prohibits smoking within 25 feet of building doorways, windows, breezeways and awnings, according to Chico State's website.

"It's about changing norms, and changing the way people think about it," Brantley said.

On campus, the fight for designated smoking areas is an ongoing battle, said Theresa Fagouri, program coordinator for the Campus Alcohol and Drug Education Center. The executive memorandum for a new campus smoking policy has been in the hands of President Paul Zingg since May 2008.

The smoking policy currently in place is not doing enough, Fagouri said. The goal is to get a 2011 policy put in place to designate smoking areas on campus.

Chico is working on creating more smoke-free areas through the Fresh Air Chico project, Brantley said. This project is aiming at specifically banning smoking in parks the Chico Area Recreation and Park District has rule over.

The addition of more smoke-free areas in Chico sounds like a good idea, said senior communication public affairs major Paul Roberts.

"I'd prefer if people didn't smoke in public places," Roberts said. "I know there are some laws in place, which is reasonable."

Others do not really care about the amount of smoke-free areas or think there is a need for more, like junior communication design major Richard Mansfield.

"Unless it's inside a house or something, smoking in public areas doesn't really bother me at all," he said.

For smokers, the proposed restrictions on public smoking areas come as an inconvenience, said Chico resident Sebastian Stepheesen.

"It's an environmental thing, and I see that," Stepheesen said. "But at the same time, I think we have the right to smoke where we want."

As of now, state law prohibits smoking in areas called "tot-lots," which are parks specifically designated for children, Brantley said, but that only covers a very small area of outdoor parks.

Health educator Christina Roberts thinks more areas in Chico need to be protected from secondhand smoke, she said.

"It's really easy to see, 'Oh there's a jungle gym, there's a swing set, don't smoke there', but when those physical reminders are absent, there needs to be a rule in place so those areas are protected as well," Roberts said.

Along with keeping Chico parks smoke-free, making it harder for people to smoke in public areas is a goal in making it easier for people to quit smoking, Brantley said. Cutting down the use of all tobacco products within the community is always an objective.

With the current hardships of the economy, passing a new policy on smoking on campus is not looked at as the most important issue, Fagouri said.

She continues to send e-mails every few months about changing the policy, Fagouri said.

Booths will be set up on campus to petition against smoking on campus throughout the semester for students to take action, Fagouri said. Students are the ones who can make the most difference in getting the policy changed.

"I can try and try, but the power is within the students," she said. "I want it done, I want something to happen."

The prevalence of smokers in the 18-to-24-year age group is increasing, said Diana Flannery, professor of health and community services.

"The addiction potential is high for this age group," Flannery said. "You are establishing your habits now."

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