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It's time for Florida legislators to make tobacco-free state parks a reality

John Michael Pierobon Your Turn

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One hundred miles of the best beaches in the state and arguably the world lie within Florida's 175 state parks, which encompass more than 800,000 acres.

There are many good reasons why the Florida Legislature must now enact a law to prohibit smoking and vaping in our state parks since identical bills, HB 495 and SB 1576, have been filed.

Secondhand smoke is a known carcinogen and can cause cancer, heart disease, and other health problems in nonsmokers who are exposed to it. Smoking creates a nuisance to visitors who do not want to be subjected to secondhand smoke, and may have respiratory or other health conditions that are aggravated by exposure to it. Smoking creates an unpleasant and uninviting atmosphere for visitors who are trying to enjoy the natural beauty of our state parks and beaches.

Tobacco trash which, in addition to cigarette butts (the most littered item in the world), includes chewing tobacco tins, cigarette packets, plastic cigarillo tips, cigars, plastic lighters, and spent e-cigarette pods, is difficult and expensive to clean up. Tobacco litter creates an unsightly and unhealthy environment for visitors. This detracts from the natural beauty of the parks.

Tobacco takes a heavy toll on the environment. Cigarette butts are not biodegradable and are the ocean's most common plastic contaminant.

In addition, cigarette butts are toxic to animals and children who may swallow them, they pollute groundwater, and they leach chemicals into the soil. They contain over 7,000 chemicals that harm wildlife and the environment, and are lethal to freshwater and marine fish. This poses a significant public health risk to visitors, particularly children and families, who come to our state parks and beaches to enjoy the outdoors.

Allowing tobacco use in our state parks, where families with impressionable young children gather, sends a dangerous message. Tobacco use is not a behavior we want to model for our children.

Discarded cigarette butts have been linked to wildfires in state parks. According to the National Park Service, cigarettes and other smoking materials are a leading cause of human-caused wildfires in national parks. This puts park visitors, surrounding communities, and wildlife at risk.

Like numerous organizations, the National Parks and Recreation Association "expressly supports a prohibition on the consumption and use of tobacco products at all park and recreation facilities in order to protect the health of our workforce, visitors and the environment."

In addition to reducing litter, being good for tourism, improving the environment, and protecting our wildlife and our children, polls have shown that a law to prohibit smoking in our state parks would be extremely popular.

California, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico and the U. S. Virgin Islands already prohibit smoking in all of their parks and beaches. This year, France will ban smoking on all beaches, public parks, near schools, and in forests. Many other countries have banned smoking in all of their parks. Why is Florida falling behind?

Opponents do not understand this is simply an issue of clean versus dirty, healthy versus unhealthy. Secondhand smoke is involuntary smoking. This is not about depriving individuals of their rights, because no one has the right to pollute the air, water, and soil, and endanger wildlife.

Citizens want clean and safe environments for their loved ones to enjoy, and tobacco-free state parks aligns perfectly with these aspirations.

Legislators say they support family values and a clean environment. It is time for them to enact HB 495 and SB 1576.

John Michael Pierobon is the vice chair of the Tobacco Free Partnership of Broward County, and the chair of the Tobacco Free Environments subcommittee of the Tobacco Free Workgroup of the Consortium for a Healthier Miami-Dade, and an active member of Tobacco Free Volusia.

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