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Gay Adults Willing to Pay Extra for Smoke-free Bars and Clubs

By Brent Brumley

ROCHESTER, NY—When asked in a recent survey whether or not they would prefer smoke-free bars and clubs, 59 percent of adults nationwide, including those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, said they preferred a smoke-free environment.

A more surprising statistic in these latest survey results released by Witeck-Combs Communications and Harris Interactive/Æ shows members of the GLBT community would actually pay extra money to avoid smoke filled clubs. When asked if they would be willing to pay an additional cover charge for their favorite bar or club to be smoke-free, 70 percent of GLBT respondents who indicated that they prefer smoke-free bars and clubs said they would be willing to pay more for that environment. In contrast, only 52 percent of heterosexual respondents who indicated the same preference said they would be willing to pay an additional cover charge.

"The good news is, lesbians and gays seem willing to put their money where their mouths are when it comes to eliminating smoke in bars and clubs not yet covered by smoke-free laws," said Colleen Dermody, vice president of Witeck-Combs Communications. "The bad news is that 34 percent of gays are still smoking cigarettes despite 2001 survey results which showed 98 percent of GLBT smokers and tobacco chewers understand that smoking increases their risk of lung cancer and heart disease. They know smoking is unhealthy, but, according to these latest results, a third of them continues to smoke."

Some key findings from this survey include: Overall, 89 percent of the GLBT adults surveyed said they have not seen an anti-smoking education or awareness campaign targeted toward them; 34 percent of GLBT adults surveyed said they smoke cigarettes, as compared to 24 percent of heterosexual adults; Of those who said they smoke cigarettes, 47 percent of GLBT adults and 36 percent of heterosexual adults smoke more than one pack each day; Only seven percent (7 percent) of GLBT adults and eight percent (8 percent) of heterosexual adults said that they smoke a pipe or cigars or use chewing tobacco.

"This survey underscores the critical need for anti-smoking awareness and education campaigns developed by and targeted to the GLBT community," said Kathleen DeBold, executive director of the Mautner Project, the national lesbian health organization.

"Until as much effort is put into GLBT smoking cessation as the tobacco companies devote to getting people hooked, gay adults will continue to die from tobacco-related diseases and our young people will continue to fall prey to tobacco industry greed," concluded DeBold.

The Mautner Project worked with Witeck-Combs to formulate the survey questions and will be conducting further research on lesbians who smoke and will lead an anti-smoking campaign for lesbians aged forty and over in 2003. And, as part of their efforts to create more smoke-free space, the Mautner Project is organizing Smoke-Free Kiss-Ins at GLBT venues for Valentines Day.

"Our biggest obstacle in convincing club and restaurant owners to go smoke-free is always their fear that they'll lose patrons," said DeBold. "Thanks to this study, we can now show them that LGBT folks want smoke-free space so much they are willing to pay extra for it. That's a great incentive for business folk to throw out the ashtrays and clear the air!"

Locally, this latest survey may add fuel to an already smoldering fire in one North Texas city. Last year, when Dallas Mayor Laura Miller took the recommendation of a City Council subcommittee to ban smoking in restaurants and bars, the Dallas Tavern Guild and its many gay bar members took a proactive stance. First on the agenda for gay establishments was to poll their customers in order to discern what action should be taken. The results of that polling were also surprising.

"Surveys were done at several bars and in the beginning everyone was skeptical thinking patrons would want to keep smoking. But then, the results came back showing 65 percent or more wanted to either move smoking outside to patios or out of the bars completely," said City Councilman Ed Oakley.

The extraordinarily high number of those who favored banning or moving smoking in the bars was not limited to those who smoke.

"I was very surprised," said Rick Espailat, Media Director for Caven Enterprises, Inc. "I was surprised at the number of people who were in favor of restricting smoking and I was even more surprised by the number of smokers who supported restricting smoking."

Once the numbers were in, the Tavern Guild sent a letter to the Council saying they would support the proposed ban on smoking in bars and clubs if the city would agree to some compromises. Specifically, guild members requested smoking be allowed on club patios and balconies, that cigarette sales not be banned in clubs, and that restaurants be held to the same standards.

"Our membership is aware that a good many potential customers say that they would frequent the clubs more if smoke were not an issue," the letter read. "Hopefully, these 'new customers' would more than offset any loss of customers who smoke. A majority of our smokers are also comfortable with smoking only on the patios of our clubs. We feel that smoking only on patios and balconies is a good compromise for this issue."

Just when it seemed the bars and the city had reached a compromise that most could accept, things changed. At the request of the mayor, several members of the Tavern Guild attended a news conference where they expected Miller to announce an agreement, with the requested compromises, had been reached. Instead, they heard the mayor tell the press she didn't have enough votes to ban smoking in bars or clubs, only in restaurants.

"We took a position which was a risk on our part with our customers. The compromise sounded good for nighttime business although it would create a hardship on daytime crowds and on bars that can't have a patio," said Pierce. "In that respect I'm glad it didn't pass, but we still expect it to happen. What we thought was a foregone conclusion, in fact, wasn't as inevitable as we were told."

Oakley believes the continued changes in how the ordinance will be written are the result of politics between three groups of people including: property rights advocates who don't want anyone's rights to be infringed on, those who don't smoke along with health and environmental activists who are for banning smoking in all public places, and those that smoke who say if you don't like it, go somewhere else.

"I'm still getting an overwhelming number of people who are in favor of banning smoking, but I'm afraid the bar owners who have supported the council are left in a difficult position. They are now going to have customers who want it banned and are expecting a ban and they're not going to get one so bar owners are caught between a rock and hard place and face possible added expenses," said Oakley.

Most bar owners expect the issue of smoking in Dallas bars and clubs is here to stay and felt they had done their best to reach a compromise that worked for everyone.

As the number of smoke-free public spaces grows, Delaware has become the latest state and New York City the latest major city to enact comprehensive restrictions on smoking, including in bars and restaurants. As of December 2002, two states and 1,595 municipalities (including all municipalities in California and Delaware) prohibit smoking in freestanding bars, four states ban smoking in restaurants, and four states ban smoking in enclosed workplaces.