

Southern smokers band together to battle 'second-class' status

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Feeling their rights are being trampled upon, groups such as the Smokers Rights Alliance are springing up to do battle with the growing anti-smoking legions.

By Elliott Minor
Associated Press

MOULTRIE, Ga. — As public disapproval of smoking grows and more states and cities restrict the habit, die-hard smokers are fighting back.

Nine cities in Georgia have smokers' rights groups. Similar organizations have sprung up in North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky and other tobacco states, too.

They've lobbied legislators and claimed discrimination, presenting themselves as a maligned minority.

"Smokers... don't deserve to be treated like second-class citizens," complained Frank Pidcock, a tobacco warehouseman in Moultrie and a member of the Smokers Rights Alliance, one of three national groups. "We've really been the whipping boy."

The president of Pidcock's organization, Dave Brenton of Mesa, Ariz., said smokers' rights groups exist across the South's tobacco-growing region, but that recent successes of anti-smoking groups in getting restrictions enacted even in the tobacco stronghold mean bolder efforts will be needed.

"I wish there were a greater degree of activity because so much attention has been focused on that region and will be in the next few years," Brenton said. "The forces arrayed against us will spend an enormous amount in the tobacco belt."

Southern states account for more than a tenth of the roughly 500 local ordinances restricting or banning smoking in public places around the nation, according to anti-smoking groups' tallies.

On the other hand, of the 20 states with a form of smokers' rights law — preventing employers from penalizing smokers or rejecting job applicants who smoke — five are in the South: Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Virginia.

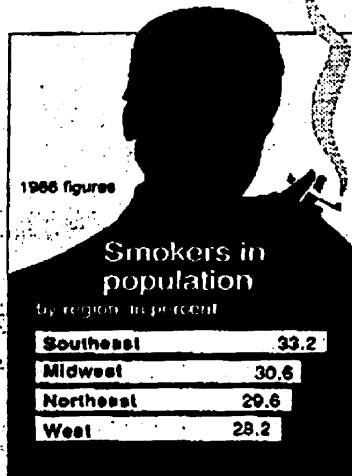
Susan Allsop, spokeswoman for the United Smokers Association in Westport, Conn., said smokers are unwilling to defend their rights and fight job discrimination.

"We've noticed over the last year that there are more and more people saying, 'My God, I didn't know there was anybody out there,'" she said. "As gays have come out of the closet, smokers are coming out of the closet, too."



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"Smokers don't deserve to be treated like second-class citizens," says warehouseman Frank Pidcock, holding tobacco leaves in his office



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have gone into it. We're the only minority left... who is willing to ride on the back of the bus."

Allsop said her group gets support from two major tobacco companies, Philip Morris USA and the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. Brenton said his group gets some support from the industry, too.

But both said the groups are truly "grass-roots" movements, not creations of Big Tobacco, as anti-smoking activists contend. "Almost always," Brenton said, "it's a reactive kind of situation to extreme, hysterical, almost irrational initiatives" by anti-smoking forces who, he argued, "march to a common drummer."

A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in October said tobacco companies claimed to have established at least 600 smokers' rights groups across the country.

and mechanism for funneling tobacco-industry resources into the fight against local legislation without the overt appearance of the tobacco industry."

The companies have built large computer databases, using mail-in rebate coupons to identify smokers, and have used those and publications such as R.J. Reynolds' Choice magazine to communicate with and mobilize smokers, the study said.

In Georgia, where flue-cured tobacco generates thousands of jobs and \$160 million a year for farmers, smokers' rights groups are expected to re-introduce two bills in the Legislature that they lobbied unsuccessfully for last year.

One would limit the authority of local governments to restrict smoking and the other would prohibit employers from discriminating against smokers.

Pidcock said the government has a responsibility to inform citizens of possible health hazards, but should not adopt "a Big Brother approach" and deprive them of their rights.

Smoking has been linked to lung cancer, heart disease and other fatal diseases. Some researchers believe environmental tobacco smoke is harmful to non-smokers, but smoking groups dispute that claim.

Max Montgomery, leader of a smokers' rights group in Macon, Ga., said smokers are more willing to speak up on issues that affect them.

"We're willing to work out a fair plan that smokers and non-smokers can live with," he said. "We're peaceful folks. I don't want to make it uncomfortable for non-smokers, but I certainly don't want them to