

Put Out Cigarette Fires Now

By KEVIN JAMES

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New York State Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno is fiddling with fire-safe cigarette legislation while New Yorkers burn to death. His inaction on the measure for the past three years helped to deliver two more grisly fire victims on Christmas Day in Brooklyn.

But while he is one of 35 state senators now in office who has accepted gifts from the world's largest cigarette manufacturer, Philip Morris, there's plenty of blame to go around. Philip Morris' stranglehold on Albany politics has turned some fire officials, lawmakers and fire unions into the proverbial deaf, dumb and blind monkeys.

Gov. Pataki, for one, stressed public safety in pushing for Jenna's Law, which restricts parole. Yet he has remained silent on an issue that would have a far greater impact on saving lives and property.

Is it a coincidence that the governor appointed as his labor secretary the former president of the New York State Professional Firefighters Association, James McGowan, several months after McGowan drafted a proclamation in 1997 opposing the safe cigarette act? Is it also a coincidence that Philip Morris lobbyist Brian Meara was handing out copies of McGowan's proclamation at the door to the Assembly's Code Committee when it convened in 1997?

There are more strange bedfellows in this Big Tobacco death grip. Thomas Von Essen, commissioner of the New York City Fire Department, in 1996 participated in a mattress fire study initiated by the National Association of State Fire Marshals. Andrew McGuire, executive director of the Trauma Foundation at San Francisco General Hospital, described the study as another attempt by Big Tobacco to draw attention from cigarettes as the greatest cause of fire deaths.

Most disturbing is Von Essen's silence on fire-safe cigarettes. Aside from cigarettes consistently causing the most fire deaths in New York City, three firefighters were killed in a cigarette-ignited fire in Brooklyn a week before Christmas.

While the commissioner spoke at length about an inoperative sprinkler system, no issue was made regarding the cigarette that caused the fire or the legislation that could have prevented the deadly blaze. The city ultimately will pay millions in lawsuits and death benefits while Philip Morris and their ilk walk away unscathed.

Then there's Mayor Giuliani, who, while he has supported the Albany fire-safe cigarette legislation on paper, did nothing following the three firefighters' deaths. Why didn't the mayor go after the cigarette companies that knowingly sell a dangerous product when safer alternatives exist?

Confidential documents obtained by "60 Minutes" in 1994 show that Philip Morris had developed a fire-safe cigarette as early as 1979. Indeed, the company's project Hamlet (aka to burn or not to burn) successfully consumer-tested its fire-safe Marlboro cigarette but shelved it until, as Philip Morris put it, "public pressure builds unduly."

Our elected officials and fire service leaders must fulfill their public trust and lobby for fire-safe cigarette legislation. Additionally, a fire tax should be levied on cigarettes to compensate fire

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departments and burn foundations for the astronomical costs incurred by cigarette-ignited fires.

Finally, our city fathers must find the courage and fortitude to haul cigarette manufacturers into court each time a cigarette causes a fire. Perhaps then Philip Morris and their cronies will become the biggest proponent of fire-safe cigarettes.

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