

# Lighting a fire under smokers

Smoking may be a hazard to health but, like the secretary of the Alexandria firefighters' union, we're amazed at the city fire department's new rule against hiring people who smoke cigarettes, pipes or cigars.

Apparently Fire Chief Charles Rule's primary interest is in saving the city taxpayers' money. As we understand it, he believes that fewer firemen will be seeking early disability retirement because of lung or heart ailments if they don't indulge in the weed. Under a special state law, such disabilities in firefighters are automatically presumed to be job-related.

But we suspect there's also a bit of the convert's zeal in Mr. Rule's action — he smoked a pipe for 23 years but kicked the habit last July. In *The Star's* account of the Mr. Rule's rulemak-

ing, the fire chief was quoted as expressing disgust at seeing firemen "go into a fire, get a belly full of smoke, then come out and have a weed hanging out of their mouths."

It would be one thing to prohibit firemen from smoking on the job, but to deny employment to otherwise qualified people because they smoke seems to us arbitrary discrimination, probably indefensible in a court of law. We've lost track of the percentage of people who smoke these days but we'd guess that at least half of the young men (and women) who want to be firefighters would be automatically disqualified by the rule against smokers.

A consultant who recommended the new rule to the the Alexandria Fire Department defended it by saying that "cigarette smokers don't possess stamina levels comparable to non-smokers." If it's stamina they're after, why not subject applicants to tests of stamina rather than to checking their pockets for cigarettes and pipes? We daresay there are some smokers who have more stamina than some non-smokers.

"It amazes me," said the secretary of the firefighters' union, Michael Conner, "how these municipalities think they can govern a person's life when he's off duty."

If the fire department gets away with it, what's to stop other city departments from discriminating against smokers? Before long, the city's welfare rolls could be full of unemployed smokers. What would the taxpayers think about that?

What's to stop city bureaucrats from promulgating hiring rules against people who drink martinis or coffee? Martinis, after all, can be hard on the liver and coffee can be bad for the heart.

How about meat eaters? Firemen might live longer and retire for disability in fewer numbers if they all ate beansprouts and spinach. Why not a rule, Mr. Rule, that says all firemen must be vegetarians?

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