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All R.I. Burger Kings snuff out smoking, starting tomorrow

■ A Cranston company, owner of 55 restaurants in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont and Connecticut, joins an escalating movement.

By FELICE J. FREYER
Journal-Bulletin Medical Writer

Nonsmokers, have it your way.

Starting tomorrow, all 29 Burger Kings in Rhode Island — along with 26 in nearby states — will prohibit smoking.

The Jan Companies, the Cranston-based owner of the 55 restau-

rants and one of the nation's largest Burger King franchises, is joining an escalating movement toward smoke-free restaurants, in the wake of last January's Environmental Protection Agency report indicting secondhand smoke as a serious health threat.

Janco is the largest Burger King franchise in the country to ban smoking. It joins 200 to 250 other smoke-free Burger King restaurants — a tiny percentage of the 5,700 Burger Kings nationwide.

"We are delighted that the Jan Companies and its Burger King res-

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Ban

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Restaurants have taken a national leadership position on going smoke-free," said Dr. Michael Vezeridis, president of the Rhode Island division of the American Cancer Society.

Janco, which owns 19 Burger King franchises in Massachusetts, 5 in Vermont and 2 in Connecticut, as well as the 29 in Rhode Island, has been moving toward this decision for 18 months, according to marketing director Patti Cimalore. It banned smoking in the corporate office and the kitchen areas, and removed all cigarette vending machines — a main source of cigarettes for underage smokers.

The company had been contemplating going smoke-free when a volunteer from the American Cancer Society, distressed after taking her children to a smoke-filled Burger King, called a Janco vice president to complain. The woman also called Jerry Maldavir, education director for the Cancer Society's Rhode Island division.

"I contacted Janco," Maldavir said. "We discussed the EPA report in detail. They were very concerned about the effect of environmental tobacco smoke on both their employees and patrons.

"Our Health Department here in Rhode Island estimates that 200 people a year die as a result of their exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. That is something that Janco is acting to reduce. By eliminating tobacco vending machines, they're doing something to cut off the greatest source of cigarettes to teenage kids."

EPA report

The EPA report, released in January, concluded that environmental tobacco smoke — better known as secondhand smoke, or smoke from others' cigarettes inhaled by nonsmokers — causes 3,000 lung cancer deaths each year. The report found that children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of secondhand smoke, which worsens asthma and increases the risk of bronchitis, pneumonia and middle ear disease.

In anticipation of the ban, customers arriving at a Janco-owned Burger King today will see signs on the doors, walls and tables that say,



Journal-Bulletin/RICHARD BENJAMIN

SIGN OF THE TIMES: A banner at the Burger King on Pontiac Avenue in Cranston proclaims the franchise-holder's new policy.

"This Burger King restaurant is a nonsmoking establishment. Thank you for not smoking."

Cimalore expects them to take it well, although the staff has been prepared to answer questions. The company does not expect the ban to

affect business.

Restaurants 'have to be responsive to their customers.'
WENDY WEBSTER, Restaurant Assn. spokeswoman

affect business.

At the other Burger Kings that banned smoking, said Michael R. Evans, spokesman for the Burger King Corp., "there hasn't been fallout." After all, Burger King diners aren't lingering over after-dinner drinks; most smokers can tolerate abstaining for the 20 to 30 minutes the typical patron spends in a Bur-

ger King, Evans said. Janco's decision comes at a time when some 80 cities, towns or counties have passed laws banning smoking in restaurants — most notably Los Angeles, which recently cleared the air in 7,000 restaurants.

The only state to take such action, Vermont, will prohibit smoking in restaurants after next year.

At the same time, an untold number of restaurants are taking action voluntarily, moved by a variety of forces.

One concern is about liability. When the EPA report came out, the National Restaurant Association ad-

vised its members that the findings might increase their risk for lawsuits from long-term employees who contract an illness that could be blamed on secondhand smoke. Adding fuel to the fire was a study in a recent Journal of the American Medical Association that found a high death rate from lung cancer among restaurant workers.

Around the same time, another study found that restaurants required by law to ban smoking did not suffer financially.

Additionally, restaurants are responding to the wishes of their customers, many of whom prefer to dine free of tobacco smells. "Restaurants are operating on 3 and 4 percent profit margins," said Wendy Webster, spokeswoman for the National Restaurant Association. "They have to be responsive to their customers."

"It wasn't really a liability issue that we made this decision on," Cimalore said. "We were really just concerned about the health of our customers and employees."

Asked if such concerns were contradictory for a purveyor of burgers and French fries — a diet deplored by the American Cancer Society as well as the American Heart Association — Cimalore said the franchise has no control over the menu, but can control the smoking policy.

"Concern for their patrons seems to be what's driving the Burger King restaurants," said Kathleen Scheg, legislative counsel with Action on Smoking and Health, an advocacy group. "Burger King really deserves to be applauded for protecting its workers and customers, especially children."

Children targeted

ASH recently launched a campaign to get fast-food restaurants to go smoke-free, because they target children, the group most vulnerable to damage from secondhand smoke.

Chuck E Cheese's, a child-oriented restaurant chain, went smoke-free earlier this year. In the Phoenix, Ariz., area, 13 Burger King franchises owning a total of 60 restaurants all went smoke-free on July 1, Scheg said. McDonald's is reportedly testing the idea at 40 sites.

At the 700 restaurants owned by the Burger King Corp., there is a nonsmoking area. The other 5,000 are owned by independent franchises that Burger King permit set their own smoking rules. Most follow the corporate position.

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