Cigarette campaign divides university

Morgan Lynch | The Breeze

JMU could soon be a smoke-free campus.

The JMU chapter of Colleges Against Cancer brought a bill of opinion before the JMU Student Government Association on March 31 that would eliminate all smoking on campus.

According to the 2014 Surgeon General's Report, 20 million people in the United States have died from smoking-related causes, and 2.5 million of those deaths were from secondhand smoke.

“We all can see secondhand smoke is a visible issue, something that is going to have repercussions in the future,” Ryan Windels, junior public policy and administration double major and university services committee chair, said.

The bill would ban all tobacco products, including e-cigarettes and vapor cigarettes from campus. Mr. Chips would
also have to stop selling cigarettes and other tobacco products.

The bill has until April 14 to acquire signatures from 10 percent of the student body, or 2,018 people. CAC will start obtaining signatures this week. After that, the SGA senate would vote on the bill. If it garnered a two-thirds majority, it would be sent to the faculty and administration.

Since SGA isn’t the governing body of JMU, it can only recommend a policy to the faculty and administration.

“We’re looking at this more as a bargaining chip,” Windels said. “This is on the table. What can we get from it?”

CAC has been working on the idea since fall 2014.

Windels hopes to get the bill through the SGA by April 14, and keep in touch with the faculty and administration to sustain discussion on the bill.

“If you choose not to smoke then you don’t want to be surrounded by smoke,” Brandi Volkers, senior biology major and president of CAC, said.

If the bill is implemented, Diane Yerian, the director of human resources and President Jon Alger can decide how the new rules would be carried out and tweak the wording if need be. If a student is caught smoking on campus, the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices would decide the consequences.

One concern brought up at the SGA meeting was professors who smoke, who can’t leave campus in between classes for a smoke break.

“This is not a personal attack against smokers,” Volkers said. “We don’t want them to feel like Colleges Against Cancer and SGA hates [them] and we don’t want them here. It’s not anything like that. We just generally want this to be a safe environment for everybody involved.”

The University Health Center offers physicians who are trained to assist students who want to quit smoking; the Common Ground program, which connects students who have experience with substance abuse and individual consultants in the UHC’s drug prevention programs. If the bill would pass, the UHC would expand its efforts to help students.

“Other large public universities nationwide have banned smoking in all parts of campus and have not seen any significant student or employee backlash,” Dr. Lee Ward, director of the University Health Center, said.

Eastern Virginia Medical School, Jefferson College of Health Sciences and Regent University are the schools in Virginia who are among the 1,543 college campuses that ban smoking anywhere on campus, according to Americans for Nonsmokers’ Rights.

Tobacco use is dangerous to the person who smokes and to bystanders. It also raises the cost of health care and insurance, according to Ward.

“Because we are specifically a student health service, we are not in a position to offer the same support to faculty and staff,” Ward said.

Some students believe that the bill would infringe on their personal decisions to smoke.

“It stinks since it’s your own personal choice to smoke or not outside in the open and it’s a good way to socialize,” Bassel Karadsheh, a senior integrated science and technology major, said. “Most of the people I became friends with were smoking outside ISAT or the dorm.”

However, for students with asthma, this bill could mean a more comfortable campus.

“I think the worst part is when you’re walking behind someone and you can’t get around them and smoke is just flying in your face,” Arllis Adou, a senior writing rhetoric and technical communication major, said. “I’m asthmatic, but I know people who aren’t and they still don’t like it, so I just think it’s a respectful thing and also [to] the environment. For the sake of respecting our communal grounds, that would be a really great thing.”

For the SGA and CAC, the most important goal is to create a healthier campus environment.

“We’re seeing the dangers now of secondhand smoke, and just the dangers of what tobacco products in general can do to people,” Windels said. “On a college campus you’re just exposed to so many people. Colleges Against Cancer and the SGA are in a unique role where we can help create a life after smoking and a life that is more healthy and more safe.”

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