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SB 63: Smoke-free Workplace and Employee Protection

SB 63 seeks to protect Alaskan employees from the adverse health effects of secondhand smoke by providing a statewide smoke-free workplace law for businesses and public places. In Alaska, more people die annually from the effects of tobacco than from suicide, motor vehicle crashes, chronic liver disease, cirrhosis, homicide and HIV/AIDS combined (Division of Public Health, 2016, Alaska Tobacco Facts).

I measure each of my Senate decisions carefully and with a yardstick that ensures freedom, liberty, appropriate roles of government, public safety/health and cost containment. We view the fundamental right to avoid the health risks of second-hand smoke and to breathe smoke-free air compels us to protect Alaska's employees as an appropriate governmental responsibility. Similar roles include establishing speed limits, regulating driving under the influence, electrical building codes and ensuring industrial employee safety regulations. The financial burden of caring for those that fall victim to tobacco-related illness due to second-hand smoke costs the State of Alaska tens of millions of dollars annually.

Current law prohibits smoking in the workplace in many areas of the state including healthcare facilities, schools, childcare facilities and public meeting rooms in government buildings. Over one half of the population of Alaska including those in Bethel, Anchorage, Juneau, Barrow, Dillingham, Haines, Skagway, Petersburg, Klawock, Nome, Unalaska, and Palmer are currently living under smoke-free laws similar to SB 63. These laws are well established and strongly supported by citizens and businesses. For Alaskans residing in the remaining areas of the state, this bill will offer a uniformly applied smoke-free workplace policy.

SB 63 does not prohibit outdoor smoking, except near building entrances/exits, air intakes, and other specifically-designated public gathering places. The bill does not legislate the employment of smokers or non-smokers. Local governments with adequate jurisdiction will retain the authority to adopt more restrictive local provisions than the statewide law.

SB 63 does not remove the right of the smoker to smoke. Rather, it limits a smoker's ability to adversely affect the health of Alaska's non-smoking employees. In other words, the bill simply asks smokers to "take it outside". More than one thousand Alaskan businesses and organizations representing all regions of the state have signed resolutions in support of a statewide smoke-free workplace law. We believe that Alaskans shouldn't be faced with years of health issues, and in many cases a shorter life, because they simply accepted employment and were then forced to breathe the smoke of other employees or patrons.

SB 63 would protect the lives of Alaska's employees by providing them with an assurance of smoke-free air in the workplace. Through SB 63 we can begin this meaningful discussion and we encourage members of both bodies to engage.

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