

Way back in 1964, the US Surgeon General declared that cigarette smoking is a cause of lung cancer and tobacco poses a health hazard. Since that time, through education, regulation, and taxation, the number of Americans who smoke has declined substantially. However, secondhand smoke still presents a significant threat to public health, especially to children. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, between 70% and 90% of non-smokers in the American population, children and adults, are regularly exposed to secondhand smoke in private homes, cars, designated smoking areas, public parks, beaches, and playgrounds. The County of Orange designated all of its parks and playgrounds smoke free and we'd like to help our towns, villages, and cities do the same.

The arguments for banning smoking in public parks and playgrounds as a matter of public health are simple. Again, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that more than 24 million, or about 37% of all US children, are exposed to secondhand smoke. They are the least capable population to avoid secondhand smoke because of their dependency on adults, and because of this exposure, they are more likely to experience increased frequency of asthma, colds, bronchitis, and pneumonia. Bans on smoking in public places and the workplace in North America and Europe have been linked to a 10% drop in premature births and the number of children visiting hospitals for asthma flare-ups.

Smoking is also bad for the environment. Cigarettes are the most littered item in America – it's estimated that several trillion cigarette butts every year are discarded improperly worldwide. Toxic chemicals found in cigarettes, including lead, arsenic, and cadmium, leak into the aquatic ecosystems threatening water quality for everyone.

Studies have shown that implementation of smoke-free laws and policies can increase cessation, reduce smoking, and may reduce smoking initiation among youth. Smoking is an easily avoidable public health risk. Let's follow the County's example to ban smoking in public parks, beaches, and playgrounds.

March 16th is National Kick Butts Day – a day dedicated to teachers, youth leaders, and health advocates organizing events to raise awareness about the problems associated with tobacco use;

encouraging youth to reject the tobacco industry's marketing and stay tobacco-free; and urging elected officials to take action to protect kids from tobacco. To "kick off" Kick Butts Day this year, the Orange County Citizens Foundation has initiated a new program with staff and volunteers to encourage the passage of smoke-free laws in public recreation areas in our municipalities. We'll attend municipal board meetings to provide data on the public health risks of smoking and secondhand smoke, offer sample resolutions for municipal boards to review, and provide information on smoking cessation programs and grants available from Healthy Orange and Pow'r Against Tobacco to pay for signage and education. Every municipality that participates will play an active and effective role in increasing our public health, protecting our water sources, and saving valuable healthcare dollars.