

LARGO TO BAN VAPING IN PLAYGROUNDS, ATHLETIC FIELDS

BY: Carlos Moncada

LARGO—The city could soon ban vaping in portions of public parks where smoking is already prohibited, part of an effort to enhance air quality and safeguard public health, particularly for youngsters.

The city commission on June 23 voted 5-1, with Vice Mayor Curtis Holmes dissenting and Commissioner Michael DiBrizzi absent, to approve on first reading an ordinance amendment that would forbid vaping and vapor-generating electronic devices on city playgrounds and athletic fields.

Those areas are now off-limits to smoking; city staffers recommended adding vaping, considered a form of smoking, to the ban.

“Over the past year, we’ve had an increasing number of the public using vape and electronic vaping devices, specifically in playgrounds and athletic fields,” said Lara Khoury, assistant recreation, parks and arts director. “And likewise, we’ve had many complaints from patrons at those locations.”

Smoking and vaping would still be allowed in other public spaces within the parks, Khoury said, just not on playgrounds or athletic fields.

“These places are generally places where there are a lot of young people playing sports or playing in a playground,” Mayor Woody Brown said. “The rest of the [outdoor] public space, they’re allowed to smoke and allowed to vape.”

E-cigarettes expose people to secondhand aerosol or “vapor” that contain nicotine and possibly other harmful chemicals. The U.S. Surgeon General has said that e-cigarette aerosol is not harmless.

“We really were more concerned about where other people from the general public that are not part of your party are in a location where they could have their civil rights impeded on by having someone smoke in their face,” Khoury said.

The city’s existing ordinance regulating smoking provides for penalties against violators of up to \$500 and up to 60 days in jail. Those who violate the vaping ban would face the same sanctions. A public hearing and final vote on the amendment is scheduled



Lara Khoury, Largo assistant recreation, parks and arts director, addresses the proposed vaping ban in parks before the city commission.
Photo: The City of Largo

for July 15.

Largo would join a growing list of local governments — including St. Petersburg, Treasure Island and, most recently, Pinellas Park — that have banned smoking and vaping in designated outdoor areas since 2022.

That’s when state lawmakers amended the Florida Clean Indoor Air Act to allow cities and counties to restrict smoking in public parks and beaches, although unfiltered cigars are exempt.

Only one member of the public spoke in opposition to the proposed ban. Greg Gardner told commissioners that it infringes on people’s constitutional rights.

“Our government is made to be a limited government,” said Gardner, noting he is a non-smoker. “It is not made for you to make a whole bunch of rules and tell us how to live our life.”

City Attorney Alan S. Zimmet suggested that Largo was on firm legal footing, saying he wasn’t aware of any legal challenges to restrictions on smoking or vaping at the state or local levels.

“I don’t believe there’s any case that says you have a constitutional right to smoke in a public place,” Zimmet said.

Commissioner Chris Johnson pointed out a little-noticed change that would allow smoking in park picnic shelters that people rent for events.

Khoury said there are already ashtrays in the shelters, and that “we felt like we were giving a mixed message by putting in ashtrays and then telling them they can’t smoke in there.”

She said the ashtrays were placed there not to encourage smoking, but to address the littering of cigarette butts, considered the most discarded item on the planet.

“They left cigarette butts all over,” Khoury said. “So in order to minimize the littering, we placed ashtrays.”