

# Anti-smoking crusade up for final vote

St. Francis of Assisi, Baltimore, parishioner and Baltimore City Council Vice President Bob Curran extinguished his last cigarette in 1998, and by the end of this year he would like to see all bars and restaurants in Baltimore become smoke-free zones.

The 56-year-old Northwood resident is lobbying to get the eight votes he needs for passage of his city smoking-ban legislation when the bill comes up for a final vote at the Feb. 26 City Council meeting.

"This is an uphill battle," said Vice President Curran, who started smoking 30 years ago while attending Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg. "If we get this passed this year, it's going to come down to the wire."

Though new Mayor Sheila Dixon has said she would sign the bill into law if it reaches her desk, the legislation needs eight yeas to pass and as of mid-February, Mr. Curran said he could only count on seven council members to cast supporting votes.

"I'm not giving up on that last vote," he said. "I need someone to have the courage to come forward and vote with us."

When the bill came up for its second reading at the Feb. 12 council meeting, it received six yeas, three nays (from councilmen James B. Kraft, Nicholas D'Adamo, Jr. and Bernard "Jack" Young) and five abstentions (councilwoman Agnes Welsh, Paula Johnson Branch, Belinda Conaway and Helen Holton and Councilman Edward Reisinger).

Mr. Curran has so far convinced one of those members to vote with the yeas, but declined to name that city office holder.

Other large U.S. cities have banned smoking in bars and restaurants in recent years - including Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York City, Boston and

Minneapolis – with many restaurant owners reporting no significant loss of business and some saying it's resulted in increased patronage.

Currently five Maryland counties – Charles, Howard, Montgomery, Prince George's and Talbot – ban smoking in bars and restaurants.

If the bill becomes law, the few remaining city Catholic parishes that have smoking sections in their church halls during events like bingo would also have to discontinue that practice when the act goes into effect Jan. 1, 2008.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, Highlandtown secretary and parishioner Diane Boemmel remembers when her church banned smoking at bingo 15 years ago, four years before she kicked the habit herself, forcing her to refrain from lighting up during the event.

The smoke-free environment didn't deter smokers from attending bingo and actually attracted others who had been turned off by the cigarette smoke, Ms. Boemmel said.

Opponents of the bill argue that bars and restaurant owners should make the call to ban smoking in their establishments, not the government.

"I think it's getting too intrusive," said Father Joseph Del Vecchio, S.S.J., a smoker and pastor of St. Peter Claver and St. Pius V, Baltimore. "It should be left up to the owners and the patrons. That way people can choose to go to a bar that doesn't allow smoking and I can enjoy a cigarette after a meal."

Baltimore Health Commissioner Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein estimates that at least 60 to 160 non-smoking Baltimoreans die yearly from exposure to secondhand smoke.

"This is a workplace safety issue," Mr. Curran said. "If you work eight hours in a smoky bar, it's the equivalent to smoking 16 cigarettes."

Opponents of the bill argue that restaurant and bar employees can choose to work in other smoke-free environments.

"I think a lot of people don't look at restaurant work as a profession, but it is and there are so few places that don't have smoking," said Diane Davis of Waverly, a St.

Ann, Baltimore parishioner and smoker who has worked in the profession more than 20 years.

“You also have to consider there are busboys and dishwashers under the age of 18 who work in these restaurants and are subjected to secondhand smoke. It’s a major health hazard.”

If the bill fails Feb. 26, Mr. Curran has vowed to continue his crusade for a smoke-free Baltimore.