

Councilman Curran basks in the smoke-free spotlight

Being known as the “Poster Child of Smoke-Free Maryland” may have shined the political spotlight on Baltimore City Council Vice President Robert Curran, but the St. Francis of Assisi, Baltimore, parishioner doesn’t believe his successful push for city- and state-wide smoking bans is his greatest accomplishment as a public servant.

Leading the charge to help Stadium Place become a nationally recognized senior housing complex at the site of the former Memorial Stadium in Waverly is what he deems his most shining triumph, but concedes the smoking ban is his highest profile political feat.

Colleagues in city government credit the 56-year-old Democrat’s tenacious multi-year battle to convince the city council to ratify its smoking ban last February as the key element necessary for the Maryland General Assembly to pass its statewide ban this year, after similar bills languished in house and senate committees during previous sessions.

“Baltimore City led the way for the enactment of this life-saving legislation, and for years, Councilman Curran led the way in the City Council,” said Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, president of the council. “Councilman Curran deserves, and has received, my thanks on behalf of city residents for championing this legislation, even when its passage seemed impossible.”

The city ban takes effect Jan. 1 and the statewide ban takes effect Feb. 1.

The path to victory was laborious and required arm-twisting maneuvers from Mayor Sheila Dixon to secure the votes for passage, but Councilman Curran never wavered in his conviction the legislation was essential to ensure a healthy work environment for employees of bars and restaurants.

Though opponents of the smoking ban argue that employees in bars and restaurants can choose to work in another industry with a smoke-free environment, the

councilman counters that many of those workers lack the skills for an alternative occupation that will render them the same financial rewards.

When Maryland adopted its smoke-free workplace law in the 1990s, it exempted bars and restaurants with liquor licenses.

The owners of those establishments said at the time the ban would cause them financial hardships because their smoking customers would discontinue patronizing their businesses if they couldn't light up.

Though some members of the city council who voted in favor of the ban last February said it was a difficult decision because there are potential economic pitfalls for some business owners, Councilman Curran - a former smoker himself - counters with statistics from New York City that showed a rise in business at bars and restaurants after smoking was banned in that jurisdiction.

"Do you allow folks to prepare food without gloves on," he asked? "It's a health thing. Laws are made to protect us. I don't believe it's a nanny law."

After Mayor Dixon signed the smoking-ban bill and created new law in the city, Councilman Curran was enlisted to speak before the state house and senate committees hearing the statewide legislation.

With the state's largest municipality joining a handful of other Maryland counties with smoking bans, the arguments against the legislation appeared to have lost the political taboo that had plagued it for nearly a decade. It made it out of the committees and passed the house and senate shortly before the Maryland General Assembly concluded its 2007 legislative session.

Most of the phone calls, emails and face to face encounters from constituents Councilman Curran has received about the smoking ban have been positive so far, but he admits to getting his fair share of negative remarks from people who believe he championed a law that violates individual rights of smokers.

Though the smoking ban will require Councilman Curran's home parish of St. Francis of Assisi to provide of smoke-free environment for its 2008 bull and oyster roast, he believes those who are used to lighting up during the event will eventually

get over the inconvenience of stepping outside of the building for their cigarette.

“Eventually, this is going to become part of the social norm,” he said. “People will look back at this several years down the road and say, ‘what was all the hubbub about.’”