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More apartment managers adopt smoke-free policies

Posted by [Carol Marshall](#) | [Oakland Business Review](#) January 17, 2008 01:03AM

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In 2007, Farmington Hills-based Village Green Companies took a step toward smoke-free living in its apartment communities. It banned smoking in all common areas, such as laundry rooms, activity and community rooms, lobbies and hallways.

And for now, despite the best efforts of Ann Arbor-based Smoke-Free Environments Law Project (SFELP), that's as far as they're going in the direction of a smoking ban.

And Village Green is not alone. Though many housing authorities throughout the state are making some rental housing - mainly senior citizen and low-income apartments - smoke-free, most traditional large property owners are leaving the door open for personal choices behind closed doors.

"As far as Village Green is concerned, we give residents the choice to smoke or not smoke within their homes," said Andrea Roebker, Village Green director of public relations. Village Green has 36 apartment communities - totaling 8,500 units - in Southeast Michigan, and 130 communities in the Midwest.

"A lot of that has to do with the fact that we care for our residents, and we want to look after the health of our non-smoking residents. But also, if you are smoking in a lobby, the concierge who works there doesn't have a choice to breathe that air or not," she said.

"We wanted to look after the health of our employees, while allowing for choice behind closed doors."

But Jim Bergman, director of SFELP, said an increasing number of apartment owners and managers are adopting smoke-free policies in their apartment units. The project started 10 years ago and just in the last year has gained popularity and momentum, he said.

"The first question apartment owners and managers ask is: Is it legal for us to prohibit smoking in our apartments? Once they found out it is, they have seen the economic reasons for doing so," Bergman said. "There is a huge market for smoke-free apartments and condos. Only 20 percent of adults smoke. That means that 80 percent of adult don't smoke, and that's not even including the children. From a marketing point of view, being smoke-free is big."

There's also a tremendous cost savings in prohibiting smoking, he added.

"The cost difference when you turn over a smoker's apartment and a non-smoker's apartment is between \$2,000 and \$6,000, when you add up all the things that have to be replaced like carpeting and sometimes even countertops," Bergman said. "There are fans in the bathroom that have to be thoroughly cleaned when a smoker leaves an apartment. Walls have to be washed down two or three times and you have to paint twice.

"Those costs mount up very quickly."

But if going smoke-free doesn't pay off, property owners will be slow to adopt the policies.

"It comes down to whether or not there is a demand for smoke-free apartments," said Alan Hayman of Troy-based The Hayman Co., which manages some 5,000

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apartment units nationwide. "We watch trends in the industry and if it becomes a trend to do a smoke-free building we wouldn't be against it. But right now, we don't have a large demand for smoke-free buildings."

Still, Hayman agrees that the turnover costs for smokers' apartments are considerable.

"There's no question that costs are higher. You have smoke burns on countertops and in the carpet. And there is the cost for deodorizing," he said. "We included in our leases that the tenant is responsible for those costs. And they agree to it, in exchange for being able to smoke."

Bergman said there are other issues including fire hazard. According to Bergman, about 10 percent of all apartment fires are caused by cigarettes.

"When you have that happen, it's not just the apartment where the fire was. It can be a whole building affected by smoke and water damage, and those units are off-line for six to nine months, not collecting any rent," Bergman added.

But statistically speaking, renters have lower incomes than homeowners. And smokers have lower incomes than non-smokers. Yet, Bergman found that that difference in renter demographics as they apply to smoking is minimal.

"The smoking rate for renters is only about 5-10 percent higher than it is among homeowners," he said. "So that still means that 70-75 percent of renters are not smokers."

The project doesn't know what percentage of rental units in Michigan are smoke-free, mainly because it's difficult to determine exactly how many rental homes there are.

"What we do know is when we first started working on this in 2004, it was virtually impossible to find smoke-free units anywhere. Now there are tens of thousands in the state. It's still a low percentage, but they're growing out there," Bergman said.

It was small business owners with just a few single-family or duplex units available that started going smoke-free first, Bergman said. Then came the senior housing and some low-income housing. But an increasing number of traditional apartment buildings are going smoke-free, he said.

In Oakland County, they include Amurcon-managed Cranbrook Centre in Southfield, a 132-unit apartment complex with a single building that's smoke-free; Harvard Place Apartments, a 20-unit complex in Royal Oak; and Teitel Jewish Apartments, a 148-unit senior housing complex in Oak Park.

"But on an almost daily basis, new ones are being added," Bergman said. Municipal housing authorities throughout the state are going smoke free, he added. Grand Rapids is the largest, with more than 900 smoke-free family and senior housing units.

But the first was Cadillac's public housing commission, which went smoke free in 2005. Since January 2006, 23 more local housing commissions in Michigan - out of a total of 132 - have adopted smoke free policies, covering almost 3,400 apartment units. Other communities with housing authority smoke free apartments are: Escanaba, Marquette, Plymouth, East Jordan, Elk Rapids, Melvindale, Livonia, Allen Park, Alma, Sault Ste. Marie, Traverse City, Ishpeming, Belding, Marysville, Paw Paw, Bessemer, Bedford Township, Bangor, Eastpointe, Southaven, Evart and Negaunee.

"It's all over the place, not just in liberal communities like Ann Arbor," Bergman said. "My guess is that we'll be completely smoke-free in three years. The reason the public commissions are going smoke-free is that they're truly worried about the health of their residents, but also because of the financial aspects."

For more information, visit [SFELP's MISmokeFreeApartment.org](http://SFELP.org).

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