

Start your future with a First Tech home loan.



Thursday, January 18, 2007

Customer Service | Subscribe Now | Pay Bill | Place an Ad | Contact Us

StatesmanJournal.com CALENDAR WEATHER JOBS CARS REAL ESTATE APARTMENTS SHOPPING CLASSIFIEDS

StatesmanJournal SALEM, OREGON

VIEW TOP RATED MOST VIEWED MOST E-MAILED SEE STORIES FROM [Select Day]

NEWS NATION WORLD SPORTS BUSINESS TRAVEL NOTICES OBITUARIES THINGS TO DO SPECIAL SECTIONS

SEARCH All [GO]

state government

EMAIL THIS STORY PRINT THIS STORY LETTER TO THE EDITOR EMAIL HEADLINES SUBSCRIBE NOW!

Ex-firefighter pushes for safer cigarettes

Set Text Size: [A][A][A]

He is part of a campaign to require sale of only "fire-safe" cigarettes in Oregon

STEVE LAW
Statesman Journal
January 18, 2007



View full-sized photo

Tom Whelan responded to dozens of residential fires traced to cigarettes during 22 years as a Salem firefighter.

The fires exposed firefighters to some of the worst human suffering and hazardous conditions because homes often were ablaze with people asleep or disoriented inside when fire trucks arrived, Whelan said.

So Whelan, who had served one House term in 1997-98 representing Salem, led a crusade in the 2005 legislative session to require the sale of only "fire-safe" cigarettes in Oregon. Such cigarettes extinguish automatically in about 5 minutes when left unattended.

The bill passed the Senate 21-8 but the GOP-controlled House snuffed it out, never allowing a hearing. With Republican-leaning lobbies such as big tobacco, the grocery industry and convenience-store chains opposed, it never had a chance — even in a state prone to costly forest fires.

It should have been a "no-brainer," Whelan said. "It really became emblematic of the partisanship and the special interests."

Eight Oregonians have died in cigarette-related fires since the 2005 bill was killed, Whelan said.

But times have changed.

With the 2007 flip in House control to Democrats, many bills squelched in past sessions are back on the table, including a fire-safe cigarette bill, House Bill 2163.

Whelan and two cohorts who led the volunteer effort in 2005 have the active support of the State Fire Marshal's office and others.

In 2005, only New York required fire-safe cigarettes. Since then California, four other states and Canada have followed New York's lead.

Even Philip Morris is working with Oregon State Fire Marshal Nancy Orr to secure language in a bill that the tobacco giant can support.

State Rep. Bob Jenson, R-Pendleton, is eager to support the bill when it comes up for a House vote.

"My next-door neighbor died of a fire in their home that was caused by smoldering cigarettes," Jenson said. "The husband got out of the building and his wife did not."

Preventing fires

Fire-safe cigarettes use bands of paper that cut the flow of oxygen when a smoker stops puffing. A cigarette tossed along the roadside or left on a mattress by a sleeping smoker will extinguish automatically rather than burn all the way to the end.

In a recent demonstration on the west steps of the Capitol, Whelan showed the difference between a fire-safe Marlboro manufactured for New York and a Marlboro sold in Oregon.

Facts

Former Salem firefighter Tom Whelan has been working to require tobacco companies to only sell "fire-safe" cigarettes in Oregon. He holds a cigarette being sold in Oregon at left, which continues to burn on its own for 15 to 20 minutes, while the other one is a fire-safe cigarette sold in New York that stops burning in about 5 minutes unless air is being sucked through the filter.

In Oregon from 2001-05:

- 1,485: Number of residential fires that smoking was a factor
- 29: Number of deaths from residential fires where smoking was factor
- 126: Number of injuries from residential fires where smoking was factor
- 70: Number of forest fires a year in Oregon
- \$28 million: Amount of property damage from fires where smoking was factor
- 44: Percentage of smoking-caused fires where bedding and upholstery are the first items ignited

Sources: Oregon State Fire Marshal, Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes, Tom Whelan

Law catching on

The following have passed fire-safe cigarette laws:

- New York
- California
- Illinois
- Massachusetts
- New Hampshire
- Vermont
- Canada

Timeline

- 1929: Congress mandates research on safe cigarettes, via the National Bureau of Standards
- 1934: Patent for fire-safe cigarette issued to The Self-Extinguishing Cigarette Corp. of

The New York Marlboro went out after five minutes when left unattended. The Oregon Marlboro continued burning for 15 minutes. Whelan figured it would have burned for 20 minutes if not for a brisk wind feeding it more oxygen.

When a smoker falls asleep with a cigarette burning, the restricted oxygen leads to incomplete combustion and greater carbon monoxide, Whelan said. If a cigarette smolders for 20 minutes, that can produce so much heat that a blanket, couch or mattress eventually ignites. Often by then, the smoker is incapacitated from the carbon monoxide and less responsive when a fire alarm goes off. Then, the room can be ablaze in five minutes.

In his 2005 effort, Whelan shared grisly photographs of a Salem woman who died desperately gripping her 4-year-old son to protect him from a 2004 house fire in Amity stemming from cigarettes. The compelling photos of the dead mother and child didn't help get the bill unstuck in the House.

"I called the speaker's office and immediately heard back that she was not going to give it a hearing," said Whelan, a Democrat.

Former House Speaker Karen Minnis, R-Wood Village, now a member of the GOP House minority, did not return calls.

Technology not new

Talk of making cigarettes fire-safe is nothing new, although tobacco companies have done their best to oppose it.

Whelan's research uncovered a patent filed in 1934 by a company that relied on technology similar to the current system.

Congressional efforts to pass a fire-safe cigarette bill have floundered, so states have taken up the matter. Oregon led the way in 1979, when the state Senate passed a memorial calling on Congress to research safe cigarettes. A bigger breakthrough came when New York passed its law in 2000.

It's not clear if the corporate interests that helped thwart Oregon's 2005 bill will put up the same fight this time.

Philip Morris, which opposed the 2005 bill, officially supports a national standard for fire-safe cigarettes, said Bill Phelps, a Philip Morris USA spokesman. The company is working to assure the Oregon bill is compatible with New York's bill, so it doesn't have to make a different cigarette for this market.

"We hope to have a bill that we can all support," Phelps said.

Fire marshal motivated

Orr, the state fire marshal, has made the bill a priority this session, using her Web site, her staff members and her relations with fire departments across the state to push the bill.

Early results in New York show a 25 percent to 50 percent reduction in fatalities caused by cigarette-related fires and in property damages, Orr said.

Sales of cigarettes have not gone down in New York, nor has the price gone up, according to studies relayed by Orr's staff.

With proven benefits from New York's law, Orr said it's time to spread the fire-prevention message beyond the Smokey the Bear campaigns of the past.

"We have struggled for years with public education, on targeting the discarding of cigarettes," Orr said. "We've reached a plateau there. The technology now will prevent a fire."

Links

House Bill 2163:

<http://www.leg.state.or.us/07reg/measpdf/hb2100.dir/hb2163.intro.pdf>

Oregon Fire Safety Coalition (led by the Oregon State Fire Marshal's office):

http://www.oregon.gov/OOHS/SFM/Oregon_Fire_Safety_COA.shtml

National Fire Protection Association: <http://www.nfpa.org/newsReleaseDetails.asp?categoryID=488&itemID=32118&cookie%5Ftest=1>

Report on the impact of New York's fire-safe cigarettes law, by the Harvard School of Public Health:

<http://firesafecigarettes.org/assets/files/HarvardStudy.pdf>

Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes: <http://www.firesafecigarettes.org/categoryList.asp?categoryID=57&URL=About%20the%20Coalition>

New York

1979: Oregon is first state to consider the issue, when Senate passes memorial asking U.S. Congress to create and enforce safety standards for cigarettes

1984: Congress, at urging of U.S. Rep. Joe Moakley, D-Mass., requires study to determine if it is technically and economically feasible to have fire-safe cigarettes

Mid-1980s: National standard developed for fire-safe cigarettes

2000: New York passes first law requiring fire-safe cigarettes, to take effect in 2004

2000: Philip Morris introduces fire-safe Merit cigarette

2005: SB 738-A, a fire-safe cigarette bill, passes Oregon Senate 21-8; fails to get hearing in House

2007: Oregon State Fire Marshal sponsors House Bill 2163, a fire-safe cigarette bill.

What's next

House Bill 2163, the fire-safe cigarette bill, will be scheduled for a hearing in the House Business and Labor Committee.

 Video: Fire-safe cigarettes

Related news from the Web

Latest headlines by topic:

- Grocery
- US News

Powered by [Topix.net](http://topix.net)