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viewpoint BY JOSHUA WELCH

Cigarette Butts

Don't let smokers treat Eugene like an ashtray

Participating in a peaceful protest in Eugene could get you slammed to the pavement, shocked with a taser and arrested. However, in broad daylight, smokers can pepper the entire city with cigarette butts without so much as a citation being written.

Why should smokers be allowed to break the law day in and day out? Why should they be permitted to flick their cigarette butts anywhere and everywhere? Littering cigarette butts is disgusting, disrespectful and irresponsible – why should we tolerate it?

With smokers essentially having a license to litter, it should be no surprise that cigarette filters are the number one littered item in the world. Smokers toss an estimated two billion non-biodegradable cigarette filters per day. As a result, these toxic tic-tacs are strewn throughout our neighborhoods, parks, beaches and waterways.

While cigarette filters are relatively small, they pack a particularly nasty punch. They're made of a plastic called cellulose acetate and can contain carcinogens, poisons and chemicals including benzopyrene, formaldehyde, arsenic, lead, benzene, butane and ammonia. They take decades to decompose, leaching their toxic load into the environment.

If we're going to allow certain types of trash to be littered, it probably shouldn't be something that is prone to starting fires. With dwindling economic and natural resources and wildfires wreaking havoc across the nation, continuing to give smokers the green light to litter is clearly negligent.

Last session, Eugene's state Senator "Pink" Floyd Prozanski sponsored Senate Bill 607 targeting littered cigarette filters, which never gained enough support to pass. I applaud his efforts, but Eugene doesn't need new legislation to hold offenders accountable. Littering is a Class C misdemeanor. The maximum penalties are 30 days in jail and a \$1,250 fine. We could clean up our fair city and create a little revenue while we're at it by simply enforcing the law.

The Eugene Police Department could carry out periodic anti-littering blitzes similar to past seat-belt enforcement campaigns. Approximately 80 percent of Australians think that smokers should be fined for littering. I suspect as many if not more Eugeneans agree. A little bit of strategic enforcement could go a long way in cleaning up Eugene and getting smokers to kick the habit.

Parking control officers are in a unique position to ticket litterers. Unfortunately, they aren't currently authorized to do so. The state Legislature could change the law, empowering them to issue littering tickets while keeping cops free to deal with more urgent concerns.

While the EPD could certainly put a big dent in the litter stream without anyone's help, partnering with the City Council in a more comprehensive approach would work best. If the Council decided to act, The Victorian Litter Action Alliance of Victoria, Australia has provided a great place to start.

The VLAA put together a "Litter Prevention Kit," which is essentially a manual for organizing and implementing an effective anti-littering campaign. According to the VLAA, "The key to success for cigarette butt litter prevention is developing an integrated campaign that tackles the pervasive problem of cigarette butts through addressing the three key program elements of education, infrastructure and enforcement." With virtually every other city in the country covered in butts, a serious anti-littering campaign could distinguish Eugene as one of America's cleanest cities.

Another possibility would be to enlist the public. Oregon could create something similar to Victoria's public litter reporting system, which enables citizens to report offenders flicking their butts from their vehicles. I'm confident there are thousands of Oregonians ready and willing to help.

Whether you're strolling downtown, hiking Spencer Butte or splashing around Fall Creek, the cigarette butts are there with you. They are there because as a society we've said it's OK. Don't you think it's about time that we stop permitting smokers to treat our home like their personal ashtray?

Joshua Welch (joshuawelch@comcast.net) is a political writer, full-time dad and part-time lover.

