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## **Still blowin' smoke in the General Assembly**

Small wonder clear vision seems to be in such short supply these days in Raleigh. Who can see for all the haze?

Rep. Alma Adams of Greensboro successfully sponsored a rule that banned smoking in the House chamber in 2003. Smoking also was prohibited on the Senate floor a year later. In addition, the legislature's two snack bars have been designated as no-smoking zones, as well as most of its cafeteria space.

You may puff as you please everywhere else, including hallways, offices and even meeting rooms. The fragrant aroma of cigar smoke can make a lasting impression in the foggy corridors of state government.

Noting both the symbolic and medical implications, the N.C. Alliance for Health plans to press the General Assembly this year to clear the air by prohibiting smoking altogether in the legislature, including offices and meeting rooms.

Still, some consider such talk the height of blasphemy in the land of the golden leaf. Consider the reaction in the House when Adams, with the support of all five of her Guilford colleagues, broached the House ban three years ago. Rep. Rex Baker, R-Stokes, called the rule a "slap in the face" to the tobacco industry and a "diminution of the freedoms that people in this body have." "We say the Pledge of Allegiance, we pray, and we smoke," Baker added, as if all three House traditions held equal stature.

The legislature also has resisted smoking bans by local governments. Hence, it passed a silly measure in 1993 that mandates that 20 percent of public buildings be set aside for smoking areas.

Opponents of smoke-free buildings argue for the rights of smokers. But what about the rights of nonsmokers, who have no choice but to breathe secondhand smoke in corridors and meeting rooms? Don't the 500 employees who work in legislative buildings and offices deserve protection from other people's bad habits? Don't visitors?

According to the National Cancer Institute, secondhand smoke claims the lives of 35,000 Americans a year, as many as 2,180 annually in North Carolina. It increases the risk of cancer and respiratory infections and can aggravate heart disease. Then there's the hazard it presents -- and the terrible example it sets -- for the scores of schoolchildren who tour the legislature each session.

Yes, tobacco helped build this state's economy. And yes, it is an inextricable part of North Carolina's history. But it's time to look ahead in Raleigh. And to breathe easier.

For the sake of common courtesy and common sense, lawmakers should snuff out all smoking in legislative buildings, period.

