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Hookah hopes go up in smoke

Noho Board of Health votes against changing city smoking regulations

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NORTHAMPTON - The Northampton Board of Health shot down an attempt to open a downtown hookah bar by voting against loosening the city's tobacco laws.

On Dec. 4, the board voted two to one against changing the city's smoking regulations, ending months of debate over hookah lounge's opening.

Co-founders of The Den, Victor Quinn, Scott Radner and Christian Rahn, received a tobacco permit from the board in April. In May, the Health Board's three members voted to pass a one-time exemption to Northampton's no-smoking laws.

They were told the hookah bar could open as long as an adequate ventilation system was installed, which was approved by the Board of Health and the Northampton Building Inspector, according to The Den's Web site.

The owners describe on their site how the ventilation would work.

"Air is being sucked out of our lounge faster than it is being pumped in and thus whenever a door is opened a vacuum is created and all air is sucked inwards," the Web site says. "This means that no smoke will ever be billowing out of our lounge."

The businessmen said they spent around $75,000 to meet the board's ventilation and other sanitation requirements. Believing they had the city's approval, the owners scheduled to open their 122 Main St. location, below Pinocchio Pizzeria, during by mid-August.

The opening was delayed while the owners waited for building permits to be granted until early November when their plans came to a screeching halt. The city told the board The Den would not be allowed to open under the city's current smoking laws.

Though Massachusetts has a statewide ban on smoking indoors, there is specific exemption for smoking bars, which must be approved by the Department of Revenue.

A public hearing was held on Nov. 12, to debate the hookah bar's exemption.

"The predominant point that the opposition made is that smoking is bad for you, and therefore the town should not allow an establishment that encourages smoking," said The Den's owners on their Web site. "Our main argument is that smoking is a legal activity, smoking bars are legal in the state, and no one that did not specifically choose to enter a hookah lounge and make an informed, adult decision to smoke would be subject to any smoke at all."

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