

# Success Stories

## Austin Parks: A Breath of Fresh Air

*Dr. Philip Huang, M.D. M.P.H*

### Summary

With the help of the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARC), parks throughout the city are now smoke-free. This environmental change impacts more than one million visitors each year, providing a healthy and safe space free of contaminants and litter from tobacco materials. Everyone now has the right to healthy and safe green spaces in Austin.

### Challenge

Austin's parks, green belts and trail systems accommodate over 812,000 residents and many more visitors every year through events like Austin City Limits and South by South West Film and Music Festival. Austin also prides itself in being a very environmentally conscious and family-friendly city. However, in 2011, after litter clean-ups revealed almost 43,000 pieces of tobacco-related litter in parkland over a short period of time, PARC acknowledged the true extent of how tobacco affects visitors and the environment. During that time, the area was also experiencing severe drought conditions, and devastating wildfires were sweeping across Central Texas, some being caused by improperly discarded smoking materials. These challenges created a sense of urgency around the need for smoke-free parks.

### Solution

Austin's long-term solution was to ensure all public green spaces became smoke-free. In the short term, PARC issued an emergency burn ban, which included smoking, in all parks. A variety of awareness strategies were employed to remind community members that smoking and secondhand smoke are hazardous to people and the environment, and are not allowed in parks. This message reached residents through guerrilla-style posters in high traffic areas; pedicab, taxi and bus signage; radio ads; and event outreach. Partnerships with Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority, City of Austin Health & Human Services, Seton Hospital, and PARC's youth programs were instrumental in achieving issue awareness and compliance.



### Your Involvement is Key

**Smoke-free parks and green spaces are essential to being good stewards of our environment and the health of our residents. Complying with the no-smoking ordinance, and encouraging others to comply, is the first step to changing the social norms around where smoking is accepted and where it is simply unacceptable. Doing your part to keep our environment clean and healthy for everyone can be as easy as living smoke-free or as involved as coordinating a litter clean-up event at your favorite park.**

## Results

After many meetings with the Golf Advisory Board, PARD Board, community members, and City Council, an amendment to the Smoking in Public Places Ordinance (SIPPO) was passed on Dec. 15, 2011. It restricted smoking on all City parkland and facilities, including recreation centers, senior centers, nature preserves, swimming pools, and municipal golf courses. Smoke-free signage was put up on all PARD properties, along with an enforceable fine, up to \$2,000. The amendment allows for an exemption at special events on city parkland to create a designated smoking area, after acquiring a permit. The permit requires the organizers to create an area that is physically separated, has a uniformed officer, fireproof receptacles, signage, and no structures that inhibit the dispersion of smoke. The amendment also allows smoking on golf courses, but only during a round of play.

### Contact

**Dr. Philip Huang, M.D. M.P.H**

City of Austin HHSD  
15 Waller Street  
Austin, TX 78702  
512-972-6460 phone  
[info@livetobaccofreeaustin.gov](mailto:info@livetobaccofreeaustin.gov)

*"The outcome of smoke-free parks is a healthier community, a happier community, and certainly a community that will live longer."*

**- Sara Hensley, Executive Director PARD**

### Future Directions

In the future, it would be ideal to remove some exceptions to Austin's smoke-free ordinance, including the ability for residents to smoke during a round of golf or for event organizers to create a designated smoking area at events on parkland. Additionally, going "tobacco-free" in Austin's green spaces, as opposed to "smoke-free" would further decrease the amount of tobacco-related litter and chemicals going into the environment and being picked up by animals and small children. In the meantime, PARD continues to educate residents about the benefits of smoke-free parks and promote compliance. Austin hopes a social norm shift will continue to occur, paving the way for future improvements.

