

Big Tobacco in the Bay State

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As if spending over \$519,000 lobbying at the State House in 1995 were not enough (that's \$10,000 per week), the tobacco industry has launched an intensive effort to thwart the progress of tobacco control at the local level throughout Massachusetts.

Knowing the low esteem with which the vast majority of the American public holds it, the tobacco industry has set up "front groups" to give the appearance of broad, public support. The National Smokers Alliance (NSA) was created by Philip Morris, the largest cigarette manufacturer, through one of its public relations firms, Burson-Marsteller. Thomas Humber, the president of NSA is also the vice president of Burson-Marsteller. Meanwhile, William Althaus, Chairman of the Board of NSA and a former mayor of York, PA, sent a letter to mayors and other key decision makers throughout Massachusetts, as well as other parts of the country. Without identifying NSA's close relationship to the tobacco industry, Althaus decries the "pressure" on elected officials to "impose economically disastrous smoking bans on private businesses."

Naturally, Althaus omits the fact that Stan Kyker, Executive Vice President of the California Restaurant Association, admitted to the Los Angeles Times in February that restaurant owners' fears about the financial impact of that state's smoke-free law "were unfounded." The San Diego tribune in December reported on the first year anniversary of that law as follows: "Restaurant sales are up. Tourism is on the rebound. The state's adult smoking rate continues to fall. And sentiment against lighting up in public, already at lopsided levels, has climbed even higher..."

Extremism is one of NSA's traits. The April 1995 issue of its newsletter, **NSA Voice**, Quotes syndicated newspaper columnist Walter Williams, complaining about the plans of eight major airlines to ban smoking on international flights. "Many Americans think it's good to restrict smoking and applaud the intimidation tactics by the anti-smoking lobby. We should remember that it was decent, well-meaning Germans who helped create an all-powerful government to do good things but didn't figure they were building the Trojan Horse for Hitler."

In his letter to local officials, Althaus purports to represent the interest of NSA's "more than 3 million members" (failing to note that most of these names come from tobacco industry mailing lists and paid signature-gathering campaigns). However, in October 1994, Alathaus testified against the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) proposed regulations of smoking in the workplace and was cross-examined by attorney Ronald Motley of Ness, Motley, Loadholt, Richardson & Poole. Asked by Motley if smokers have a right to be informed about what substances are in tobacco and the impact they may have on their health, Althaus replied, "I have no opinion on that." When asked if he believed smoking is addictive, he replied, "I have no idea." On S.2191, state legislation to provide smokers with information on the ingredients and nicotine levels by specific brand, the NSA has been silent while the tobacco lobby has lobbied fiercely against it. Opponents of S. 2191 include R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., whose slogan is "We work for smokers."

One of R.J. Reynold's Tobacco Co's lobbyists at the State House is Roger Donoghue,. Mr Donoghue is also a lobbyist for the Massachusetts Restaurant Association (MRA). The sharing of a lobbyist since 1993 is just one of several layers of MRA's unholy alliance with the tobacco lobby.

The MRA and Big Tobacco have worked together on behalf of S. 508a, a bill to provide weak statewide standards regarding smoking in larger restaurants and pre-empt the authority of boards of health to pass any local regulation that is stronger.

In Late January, MRA Executive Director Peter Christie wrote an op-ed column that embraced the tobacco industry's "spin" on the Congressional Research Service's (CRS) recent study on secondhand smoke. Nationally, the tobacco industry is claiming that the CRS study totally invalidates the conclusion of the 1993 Environmental Protection Agency report that concluded

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that environmental tobacco smoke is a known, human- or Group A - carcinogen. In fact, the CRS report actually buttresses the essential finding of that EPA report. CRS' authors noted that, based on data published from a major study published after the EPA report, exposure to ETS will "result in a range of 470 to 5,500 annual lung cancer deaths in the U.S. from ETS with a mean value of 2,780. This compares to a mean value of 3,300 calculated by EPA..." In other words, there is disagreement about precisely how many nonsmokers will develop lung cancer each year from ETS but agreement that exposure to ETS does cause lung cancer in nonsmokers.

One of the CRS researchers, Stephen Readhead, told the Waterloo (Ontario) Record in February that the CRS study is being misused. When told that a restaurant trade publication had published an article saying that data from the CRS study "indicates that the risk associated with workplace exposure to ETS is infinitesimal compared to the most casual risks of everyday life, including driving to work," Redhead responded: "No. I don't like that. I'm a details person and I can't accept wild accusations like that."

When you see pro-tobacco columns or letters to the editor in your local newspaper, or hear similar comments at public hearings or on talk shows, you can see the influence of Big Tobacco. After all, smoke-free policies and laws do cause significant economic harm - to tobacco companies! If we in the public health community can recognize and then expose this influence, we will be well on our way to succeeding at defeating Big Tobacco and making Massachusetts a healthier place to live.