



## N.C. Smoke-Free/Tobacco-Free Government Buildings, Grounds and Parks

# Bessemer City: A Leader on Tobacco-Free Policy in N.C.

### Summary:

The small, blue collar town of Bessemer City, N.C. has kicked off a ripple effect of smoke-free and tobacco-free policies in its county and region and has served as a champion for and an unexpected validator of smoke-free and tobacco-free community policies. The keys to the Bessemer City's success include patience, persistence, good timing and finding a champion on the inside. City Manager James Inman served as that champion, with critical support from the Gaston County Health Department and the N.C. Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch (TPCB). All these pieces were brought together by energetic Region 4 Tobacco Control Manager Carleen Crawford, who modeled the patience and persistence that led to a huge success.

**Challenge:** Tobacco use is still the number one cause of preventable deaths and disability in North Carolina and in the nation, and North Carolina local governments have the authority to make some areas smoke-free and tobacco-free. Crawford first approached Bessemer City in the summer of 2014. She found a champion in City Manager James Inman, whose family had suffered greatly from the health effects of tobacco use, and who found a fair amount of support from his city council for making all Bessemer City buildings, property, and parks tobacco free and public places smoke free. The problem was timing. With elections approaching, the timing and climate were just not right.

**Solution:** When Crawford and Inman touched base in spring 2016 the time was right. The council was still supportive, and council terms had changed from two to four years, so no elections were in the near future. In addition, the North Carolina Association of Local Health Directors had recently announced a challenge award for communities adopting strict smoke-free policies. Inman and the council were interested in winning the award. Now was a good time to move forward.

TPCB, Crawford and Gaston County Health and Human Services stepped up to provide technical assistance and support for the Bessemer City effort, providing model regulations. After review, the City Council members developed their own version, and scheduled the required public hearing. The health department found and prepared public hearing speakers from the community, using message maps provided by TPCB. Speakers were overwhelmingly positive about the proposal and it passed with a unanimous vote.

### Quote

*"In the last 15 months we have not had a bit of complaint about it; we've had compliments. We've actually seen our program grow. We had a heavy use of tobacco in this community, being a blue-collar textile town. We're seeing more people running and walking on our streets. It's just been an amazing transformation for us."*  
James Inman, City Manager, Bessemer City, N.C.



**Results:** The regulation, which created tobacco-free government buildings, vehicles, grounds, and parks, as well as smoke-free indoor public places, passed in August 2016. Inman reports only a little push-back, early in implementation. The city had put into place an approach that was hard on the problem and soft on the people. This approach included a delay in full enforcement, and distribution of friendly cards carried by police officers and other city staff to educate about the law and inform about QuitlineNC. Bessemer City changed its slogan from “the city with heart” to “the city with a healthy heart.”

The health department handled the press by issuing a news release to educate the public on the health reasons for the regulations, also handling press questions and public issues. The city put notices in water bills, it’s website and newsletter to educate the public as well.

The Bessemer City story, including the partnership involved, has become a model for Gaston County, as well as Health Region 4 and the whole state. Conover in Catawba County and Cherryville in Gaston County have followed the same model to adopt identical policies based on Bessemer City’s work. Tobacco Free Gaston has taken up the torch of new tobacco control policies in Gaston County and has attracted many new partners.

On March 1, 2018 Region 4 Tobacco Free Alliance, Tobacco Free Gaston, and Bessemer City hosted a kickoff to push for as many new tobacco control regulations possible between March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. This March Forth initiative is being promoted statewide, as the Bessemer City Model ripples across the entire state.

In fact, Bessemer City continued to improve its regulation on May 14, 2018 by making public places tobacco free, rather than just smoke free.

## Lessons Learned:

- Policy work takes listening, communication, patience and good timing.
- A great first step is finding an inside champion for the cause.
- Gather a team of individuals and organizations who can share the work.
- Be hard on the problem, but soft on the people.

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To learn more about smoke-free policies in N.C., visit [www.tobaccopreventionandcontrol.ncdhhs.gov](http://www.tobaccopreventionandcontrol.ncdhhs.gov)



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