

THE STATE

Journal Register

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OUR OPINION Communities should ban leaf burning

EVERY YEAR ABOUT THIS TIME leaf burning becomes — pardon the pun — a hot topic. But this year there seems to be a bit more fire behind all of that smoke. Anyone who has taken a gander at these pages in recent days

OPINION

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State Journal Register November 17, 2004

Our Opinion

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EVERY YEAR ABOUT THIS TIME leaf burning becomes - pardon the pun - a hot topic.

But this year there seems to be a bit more fire behind all of that smoke. Anyone who has taken a gander at these pages in recent days knows that the pro- and anti-leaf burning contingents are out in force this year.

We are not sure what changed, but it certainly seems that more people are upset in the areas around Springfield where leaf burning remains legal. And their pleas to stop this unhealthy practice has brought out people who see leaf burning as an important tradition.

"Must we live in a bubble during the leaf-burning season because some find it easier to burn than bag?" asks one letter writer. Other letter writers talked about becoming prisoners in their own homes or fretting over their children with asthma who become violently ill when the leaf smoke fills the air.

Yet to some, the people sick of leaf smoke are simply whiners.

"To those who've complained about their health problems: I'm sorry about your conditions. However, you are in the minority. Most people in these communities prefer to burn, and I don't think everybody should change just to suit a few people," wrote another letter writer, who promised he will continue to burn his leaves regardless of who it bothers.

This debate happened in even bigger fashion 17 years ago as Springfield finally decided it was time to clear its fall air. The following autumn, Sept. 1, 1988, to be exact, Springfield residents could no longer legally burn their leaves.

Plenty of grousing went on at the time, but we suspect if a vote were taken today in Springfield, it would be overwhelmingly in favor of not burning leaves. You kind of get used to clean air.

DESPITE WHAT our angry leaf-burning letter writer would like to say, this practice truly is a hazard for many people. In fact, one study indicated that about 40 percent of Illinois residents have some form of health problem - allergies, bronchitis, emphysema, other lung problems or heart problems - that can be worsened by the toxins released from a smoky leaf fire.

Besides stinking up entire neighborhoods and occasionally obscuring roadways, leaf fires release loads of carbon monoxide (you probably have an alarm in your house that would go off if your furnace released this

deadly gas), certain cancer-causing chemicals similar to those in cigarettes and particulate matter that can scar your lungs.

Studies of communities where leaf burning has been banned found that in ensuing years emergency room admissions for respiratory problems were drastically reduced.

Of course, none of those statistics matter to people who put leaf burning in the same category as the right to bear arms or freedom of speech - they'll stop burning leaves when you pry their rakes and gas cans from their cold, dead hands!

Well, it is time to start prying. Leaf burning should not be viewed as a right, rather as an irresponsible practice that is a nuisance to most and a serious health threat to some.

It took a long time for a city the size of Springfield to be convinced to stop burning. It will probably be an even tougher fight in some smaller surrounding communities. But there are other, practical options for dealing with leaves, leaving no sound reason not to ban the practice.

And just because you can burn doesn't mean you have to. Be responsible and show some respect and compassion to your neighbors.

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