Downtown dining smoke-free

Some restaurants already ban smoking

By Dan Daly
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Brian Winter, co-owner of Tally's Restaurant in downtown Rapid City, has some advice for fast-food giant McDonald's: Expect to hear a lot of complaints, and don't be surprised if you lose some longtime customers.

McDonald's announced last week that it would turn its 1,400 company-owned outlets into smoke-free restaurants. Tally's became a non-smoking restaurant on July 1.

The move by McDonald's, the world's largest fast-food chain, is expected to pressure the bulk of McDonald's franchisees to also ban smoking. Local McDonald's franchise owners were not available for comment last week. But most local restaurants allow smoking in designated areas.

The Sixth Street Bakery and Delicatessen has been a smoke-free restaurant for 1½ to 2 years, according to manager Doug Christensen.

But the deli, with a primarily vegetarian menu, met little resistance from its patrons. Christensen said smoking was eliminated because of the threat of second-hand smoke.

"And you can actually smell the baked goods" now that the deli is smoke free, he added.

But at Tally's, a 47-year-old downtown landmark, the decision to close the restaurant to smoking was not an easy one, Winter said.

But he increasingly heard complaints from non-smokers, especially in the summer from tourists and bus groups made up predominantly of retired non-smokers.

With seating for just 101 patrons, the restaurant was too small to successfully segregate smokers and non-smokers, he said. Winter waited until the St. Joseph Street road construction was finished to enact the new policy. "At the time, we were fighting for every customer we could get," Winter said.

After July 1, when the signs went up and the ash trays disappeared, the reaction was "very strong and very negative, almost militant. Smokers were absolutely livid," Winter said. Many of his smoking customers vowed to never set foot inside the restaurant again, and a couple have kept their promise. "I see them walk by the restaurant every day," said Winter.

The move wasn't very popular with the waiting staff, either. Six of nine restaurant employees were smokers, and they objected to the new policy, Winter said. But they since have gotten used to the policy and now take turns smoking near the back door.

But overall the business hasn't suffered, Winter added. Some new patrons, including a group of athletes who now come in almost every week, are making it a point to eat at Tally's because of the smoke-free atmosphere.

Many customers still thank him for turning Tally's into a non-smoking restaurant.

"I do regret that we lost some people that have come here for many years. I regret they feel they have to go somewhere else," said Winter.

Sixth Street's Christensen said that since Dec. 4, when he became manager, he has heard just one complaint from a customer. That customer, not knowing about Tally's 6-month-old smoking ban, told Christensen he was taking his business to Tally's.

"He was in for a surprise," Christensen said.