

Wednesday February 9, 2011

To: Members of the Public Health Committee

From: James Fisher, General Manager, The Hartford Club

Re: Senate Bill 884, An Act Prohibiting Smoking In Private Clubs

Position: Oppose

The purpose of this bill, as the title states, is to ban smoking in private clubs. We strongly oppose the State of Connecticut changing its long-standing public policy of permitting private clubs to determine where, when, or whether to allow smoking in each of their individual establishments.

There are numerous private clubs in Connecticut including the VFW, American Legion, Polish American Club, the Elks, golf clubs, and of course The Hartford Club. Most private clubs are self-governed by revolving boards and committees representative of the membership. They are highly responsive to the changing needs and desires of their members, including club policies on smoking.

The Hartford Club has been proactive in building a separate, members-only smoking lounge that includes a free standing state of the art ventilation system. Our members-only smoking lounge accomplished an important goal of creating a comfortable smoking section for those members who choose to smoke, while meeting the desires of non-smokers to have a smoke-free environment throughout the rest of the building. There have been no complaints from members, guests or groups using our banquet facilities about smoke from the designated smoking area. Indeed, one of the primary reasons The Hartford Club designed and paid over \$200,000.00 for a sophisticated ventilation system in the designated smoking area, was so guests of the Club would be able to enjoy our smoke-free banquet facility areas.

The Hartford Club understands the State of Connecticut's interest in protecting the general public from second-hand smoke. However, the State can accomplish its objective of protecting the general public by simply prohibiting smoking within private club areas that are rented to the general public on a regular basis. Where private clubs like The Hartford Club have already restricted smoking to private, members-only lounges, there is no need for a prohibition on smoking to apply to those areas.

Several members have joined and use the Club solely for the access they are provided to a private smoking area. Should this ban become law, their need for the Club facilities will be greatly reduced and the Club would likely suffer a significant loss of membership. Membership in private clubs is not mandated. If Club members lose interest or no longer agree with leadership or membership-wide decisions, regardless of the subject, they simply don't renew their membership.

If a group which may use a club's banquet facilities for a meeting is not comfortable with *any* of the club's policies, they will do what any other consumer would easily do - choose another banquet facility. Those differences in club policies are what existing and potential members find most important in making membership decisions.

As mentioned, members of all clubs are empowered directly and through periodic elections to change or modify their internal smoking policies and understandably believe that it is

unnecessary for the State to involve itself with that decision making process. We believe this recognition of the power of members to shape their own policies was one of the key reasons that the General Assembly exempted private clubs when the bill was first enacted.

Does this membership decision making process work? Most certainly, it does. Club members know how to manage their clubs; otherwise they would go out of business. One only needs to look around the state at different clubs to find a variety of approaches to smoking, which, importantly, has been decided by the membership of each particular club.

For the State of Connecticut to change the rules in midstream, after a club may have devoted significant time and resources, is an unfair and unreasonable approach to an issue, which is appropriately being dealt with by each membership.

We certainly don't question the State's interest in the health issues of tobacco consumption. However, it is legal, just as other sometimes health-implicating activities including alcohol consumption or skiing without a helmet. We respectfully submit that among adults who have the ability to make rational choices, there should be a reasonable limitation to any State intervention in such private decision-making.

We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee on this issue and to provide any additional information that would be helpful.