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LIFELINE TO SMOKERS

SMOKING ZONES ARE A GO

Business operators allowed to set up smoking areas next to eateries, says minister

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SMOKERS, banned from lighting up in eateries since last year, have been thrown a surprising lifeline by the Housing and Local Government Ministry in the form of approved smoking zones.

Housing and Local Government Minister Zuraida Kamaruddin yesterday announced that business operators would be allowed to set up smoking areas next to eateries for smokers.

These zones, she said, would be at least 3m from eateries.

She said the country's 155 local councils would be allowed to build smoking zones in some public places, especially in food courts, within their jurisdiction.

She said the move was to support the Health Ministry's smoking ban in eateries, which came into force on Jan 1 last year.

The move, she said, aimed to help smokers with the transition.

She said the ministry would allocate RM1 million for the construction of smoking zones in public areas, including in commercial areas and food courts owned by local councils.

"For restaurant owners, we will issue guidelines from the ministry.



An eatery displaying a no-smoking sign in Petaling Jaya recently. PIC BY KHAIRUL HELMI MOHD DIN

Business operators will have to seek permission from local councils to build small smoking zones."

The smoking zones, she said, would need a roof, seats and a place to dispose of cigarette butts.

She said smoking zones could be built as a joint effort if there was more than one restaurant in a building, with the cost borne by the business operators.

"However, in the case of public areas owned by the local authorities, the councils can apply with the ministry for allocations to construct smoking zones. We will allocate approximately RM5,000 for each smoking zone," she told a press conference here yesterday.

The Health Ministry gazetted all food and beverage outlets as smoke-free areas from Jan 1 last year, with an educational enforcement period in place for 12 months. Smokers can only light

up at least 3m away from food and beverage establishments.

Beginning Jan 1 this year, the authorities began full-scale enforcement of the ruling. Up to yesterday, 2,617 compound notices have been issued at 35,979 eateries inspected.

The smoking ban has raised questions on whether smokers who light up at tables set up illegally outside restaurants would also face punishment.

Deputy Health Minister Dr Lee Boon Chye had said restaurants were forbidden from providing smoking areas for customers.

Meanwhile, Zuraida said the ministry had set up a model smoking zone in Senario Ampang. It had two smoking booths with a roof, seats and rubbish bin.

She said providing such facilities would make it easier for smokers to embrace the ruling.

Asked whether the move would send out the wrong message and contradict the Health Ministry's aims, Zuraida said it demonstrated that the ministries were co-operating and should be viewed positively.

"For now, we are recommending that restaurant owners build their own smoking zones.

"However, we may eventually make it compulsory for them to do so.

"Business owners have to be willing to invest a little.

"We are only making things a bit easier for smokers, who represent about 20 per cent of the population. They are also taxpayers."

Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad said his ministry and the Housing and Local Government Ministry agreed to allow premises to build smoking areas.

D-G: Repeat offenders to be taken to court

KUALA LUMPUR: Errant smokers will be taken to court if they fail to pay the compound after being issued a notice.

Health director-general Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said offenders who refused to pay the compound would be charged in court and be liable to a fine of not more than RM10,000 or jailed not more than two years.

He said first-time offenders would be eligible for a reduced compound of RM150.

"There will be no reduction to the compound if the payment is made after one month and the offender will have to pay the full amount of RM250.

"The compound for the second offence is RM250 and the third offence is RM350."

He said two months after paying the compound, repeat offenders would be charged in court.

He said currently, there was no law that required offenders to carry out social work or Corrective Work Orders as penalty.

On the collection of compounds, Dr Noor Hisham said an offender would first be issued a compound notice and the amount would be decided by the deputy public prosecutor.

He said premises owners needed to adhere to Regulation 12 of the Control of Tobacco Product Regulations 2004.

"Premises owners will receive a compound notice if they fail to abide by Regulation 12."

Regulation 12 stipulates that premises owners are responsible for ensuring adherence to the smoking ban by putting up signs and advising patrons against lighting up.

Mayor: City Hall to gather feedback from restaurant operators

KUALA LUMPUR: Kuala Lumpur City Hall will meet restaurant operators and related parties this week to discuss at length the requirements and implementation of the newly proposed designated smoking areas.

Mayor Datuk Nor Hisham A Dahlan said City Hall would obtain suggestions and feedback from stakeholders.

"We have been receiving complaints from restaurant owners that business has been affected by the smoking ban.

"So we will meet them, along with residents' associations, non-governmental organisations and related parties to discuss this."

He said City Hall was drafting

the criteria for the designated smoking areas, adding that feedback from stakeholders would be taken into account.

He said there were 15,000 restaurants in the city, but it was impossible to have that many smoking areas.

He said City Hall officers would be sent to assess the areas proposed by stakeholders.

"We want a win-win situation. The smoking areas will not be built indiscriminately. For example, they won't be located next to schools."

Housing and Local Government Minister Zuraida Kamaruddin had announced that local authorities that wish to set up smok-

ing areas in public places within their jurisdiction could apply for allocations from the ministry.

The move was met with guarded optimism by Malaysian Indian Restaurant Owners Association president T. Muthusamy, who said the association would need to study the requirements for the smoking areas.

He said businesses were hit hard by the smoking ban and urged the authorities to concentrate on raising awareness.

"Devise new methods to educate smokers on health risks, but at the same time, enforcement should also be firm on the sale of illicit and single stick cigarettes."

Smokers rights group Smokers

Awareness Group Malaysia said the ministry's move would be well-received by smokers, non-smokers and business operators.

Its chairman, Mohd Hanizam Yunus, said this was a "win-win" decision for all parties.

"This was among suggestions presented to the Health Ministry in a three-page recommendation at the end of 2018. Unfortunately, the ministry never got back to us, forcing us to go to the court."

He said among the suggestions were for the ban to be imposed only indoors.

Bukit Bandaraya Residents Association adviser Datuk Muztaz Ali criticised the ministry's decision, saying it was a step back-

ward.

"What a shame. On one hand, the Health Ministry is trying to create a smoke-free environment, but the Housing and Local Government Ministry is instead trying another recipe."

"People are discouraged from smoking, but with a designated area, you are not helping them quit the habit. Plus, if the designated area is inside a residential area, it will be a hassle for residents. Hawkers may set up stalls next to the smoking area."

He said if the ministry went on with the plan, the location of smoking areas should be decided only after consultation with the local community.