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Owners, smokers back smoking zones

But groups against move describe it as 'a step forward and two steps back'

PETALING JAYA: The government's recommendation for special areas for smokers to be set up outside eateries is welcomed by restaurateurs and smokers.

However, the move has faced resistance from anti-smoking groups, who described it as a step back.

Original Penang Kayu Nasi Kandar managing director Burhan Mohamed said that while he welcomed the suggestion, proper studies needed to be done first before restaurateurs set up smoking booths or erect canopies outdoors.

"If we were to set up smoking areas 3m away from our restaurants, we still need approval from the local authorities because that's not our land.

"Yes, we can ask for their approval but it will ultimately depend on the location. We have to study the place to see whether the area is safe for smokers or if parking will be obstructed and if we need to buy insurance," he said yesterday.

Malaysian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association (Presma) president Datuk Jawahar Ali Taib Khan also supported the move to build designated smoking areas near eateries.

"If the government can consider allowing designated smoking areas for our customers, most of our eateries will not mind having to bear the cost for it," he said.

Jawahar said the cost of setting up the smoking areas would be small compared to gains of having



Mixed smoke signals: Restaurant owners and smokers support smoking zones near outlets much to the chagrin of anti-smoking groups.

improved business from the move.

Malaysia-Singapore Coffee Shop Proprietors General Association chairman Datuk Ho Su Mong said in the current economic situation, restaurateurs would feel the pinch if they were forced to fork out their own money to set up smoking areas.

"The government should help. We can do it like Singapore where the government has set up designated smoking areas known as yellow boxes in certain areas.

"This would be better because for restaurants to set up smoking areas outside our premises, we need the

approval of the local government and we can't just set up anywhere we like," he said.

Pro-smoking group Pertubuhan Kesedaran Perokok Malaysia (PKPM) chairman Mohd Hanizam Yunus described it as a win-win plan for smokers, non-smokers and restaurant proprietors.

"We welcome the statement and we're confident that it will be well received by the 4.7 million smokers in this country.

"The designated smoking area was what we wanted to propose to the Health Minister in three letters

sent to him in late 2018. It was a pity that none received a reply.

"It left us with no choice but to go to court to challenge the smoking ban," said Mohd Hanizam, who is the founder of PKPM, the group that started a judicial review on the smoking ban enforced since Jan 1 this year.

The PKPM is appealing the High Court decision, which rejected its attempt for a judicial review of the smoking ban, at the Court of Appeal with the case management due on Jan 17.

"We will also discuss with our lawyers on the new direction of our appeal following this latest statement by Zuraida (Kamaruddin)," he said.

Anti-smoking groups, however, likened the move to the government taking many steps back from the progress of the smoking ban.

SmokeFreeMY initiative coordinator Muhammad Sha'ani Abdullah was strongly against the government's move to allow smoking zones.

"This is unacceptable. It is against the tobacco control policy and goes against Malaysia's commitment to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)," he said.

The FCTC, he said, stated that a strong political commitment was needed to develop measures to prevent people from starting to smoke and to support smokers who are trying to quit.

International Islamic University Malaysia's Department of Pharmacy

Practice Assoc Prof Dr Mohamad Haniki Nik Mohamed said the government need not spend so much money to build smoking areas.

"We just implemented the smoking ban. But now we have smoking areas. It is like taking one step forward and two steps back," he said.

Malaysians, in general, are not keen on the idea of having designated smoking areas built outside eateries and in public areas.

Based on a poll conducted by *The Star* on social media, the recent announcement by the government left many feeling outraged, with most of them saying it is a waste of resources.

Facebook user Nashyea Myrks said the cost to build a designated smoking area would indirectly contribute to a hike in food prices in restaurants.

Kenzo Mann echoed the sentiment, saying smokers could just go outside whenever they wanted to smoke.

However, others have accepted the announcement with open arms.

Twitter user @merahza said that he "absolutely agrees" with the idea, citing that human rights are a "two-way street which is to be honoured and respected in both directions", referring to a smoker's right to smoke.

Alex Chan said the smoking ban was akin to stripping away the rights of certain groups of people in the country who wanted to "indulge in their chosen habit".