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*** FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ***

Landmark Watering Hole, The Lander Bar, Goes Smoke-free

CHEYENNE - A Lander Main Street icon packed up the ashtrays today and became the latest Wyoming business to go smoke-free. The Lander Bar now joins the Gannett Grill and the Cowfish restaurant in Lander's famous downtown Coalter Block as smoke-free establishments, joining at least 17 other food service businesses in town where lighting up is no longer allowed.

"The main driving force behind the decision is the health of my employees," said Lander Bar owner Jim Mitchell, of Jackson. "It's something I've wanted to do for a number of years."

Statewide, the percentage of smoke-free restaurants has grown to 68 percent, up from 45 percent just five years ago according to Wyoming Department of Health officials.

Department of health director, Dr. Brent Sherard, said reducing exposure to secondhand cigarette smoke helps lessen the risk for heart disease and respiratory ailments, especially among restaurant and bar employees.

"I think it goes without saying how important a smoke free work environment really is. There's no question smoking is harmful to your health, everybody appreciates a clean atmosphere and a clean work environment," Sherard said.

Owing to the history of the Lander Bar, its wild west atmosphere and loyal clientele, Mitchell said he resisted making the change until he began losing good employees to non-smoking establishments. He also said the death from tobacco-related causes of several long time friends and customers influenced his decision.

Mitchell bought the bar and the adjoining Lander Hotel 11 years ago.

"At first, all the bartenders and clientele smoked, so it was not a problem for me," Mitchell said. "But then I opened up the Gannett Grill in the same building, and the smoke became more of a problem, especially in the winter."

To combat the indoor pollution, Mitchell purchased smoke eaters and installed exhaust fans to keep from bothering non-smoking diners.

"I found it was a losing battle," he said. "In the summer it was not that big of a deal because we could leave the doors open and swamp coolers kept fresh air coming in. But in winter, the smoke was almost unbearable. Employees were complaining and I realized I didn't even like going in there and I found myself spending less and less time there."

To assuage his guilt over allowing smoking in the bar Mitchell said that when he opened up the Cowfish, a microbrewery and restaurant in the same block, he made that business smoke-free.

"If people wanted to come to the Coalter Block and have a meal and a drink, I was offering an alternative," he said. Yet Mitchell said he also feared that being smoke-free in the bar would be bad for business.

"But during the last couple of years more of my employees don't smoke, bartenders started quitting smoking, and they all started saying they didn't want shifts at the bar but at the smoke free Cowfish," he said. "After I lost a couple of really outstanding employees because of the smoking issue and after a long-time employee and former smoker suggested we go non-smoking, I decided it was time to do something."

"The Mangy Moose here in Jackson went smoke free a couple of years ago and I find I go out there to listen to music," he said. "I just think it will eventually happen everywhere and I was hoping to wait until the state did it, but I can no longer wait. I asked myself what was more important, making money or keeping employees in a safe environment. I finally got the guts to do it."

In addition to the health benefits to his employees, Mitchell said he also expects to save on cleaning and electricity. "Smoking turns the ceiling yellow and I had employees doing extra work cleaning the smoke eaters every day and the extra expense of operating them every night," he said.

Smokers are still welcome at the Lander Bar. Mitchell said he's created a new covered patio area outside where patrons can smoke. "The hardest part for me is that I hate being a preacher and telling people how they should act, but at the same time, I want a safe place for my employees to work and for me to work," he said.

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