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Hawaii's beaches rank high on the list of the state's finest assets, which is why community leaders here are right to rail against treating them like ashtrays. Smoking represents a threat to public health and, when cigarette refuse is lapped up in the waves, a poison for marine life.

The instinct to safeguard the shoreline has produced smoking bans at Oahu and Hawaii island beach parks. But much more needs to be done, and soon, with the advent of new tourism markets being tapped in China and other countries where smoking is even more prevalent than it is here.

Until Friday, the efforts had included a proposal before the state Legislature for a ban encompassing all beaches in the islands.

House Bill 325 got its first hearing last week before the House Water and Land Committee and the Committee on Ocean, Marine Resources and Hawaiian Affairs.

The measure was killed, and unless there's an extraordinary effort to revive the issue, Hawaii will have to wait at least another year to take this bold policy step.

If anything, the failure of the bill increases the urgency that communities work on the component most critical to the intended law's success: public education.

That work has been underway, in fact, since 2008, when Hawaii County enacted a smoking ban at county beaches and parks.

On Oahu, progress came in the form of two ordinances, passed as Bills 25 and 72, which first banned smoking at Ala Moana and Kuhio beaches, then extended the prohibition. The islandwide ban, which took effect Jan. 1, carries a \$100 fine for the first offense.

But most people realize that catching people in the act of lighting up is not going to be Job One for law enforcement. There have been warnings and some citations issued, said Suzanne Frazer of the nonprofit organization Beach Environmental Awareness Campaign Hawaii (www.b-e-a-c-h.org/smoke-free-beaches).

However, the work by Frazer's group and other volunteer networks has been focused on putting out the word about the ban, both the fact that it's in effect and the reason for it. Some of the themes are familiar — secondhand smoke from someone puffing a cigarette carries a documented health risk to nonsmokers nearby.

Where beaches are concerned, that issue here has been compounded, if not overtaken, by the concern about threats to the marine environment.

Seeing the grass and sand strewn with cigarette butts, and seeing the ocean water fouled as well, is not the goal of anyone who comes to the beach on a sunny day, resident or tourist.

That message needs to spread as far as possible. Volunteers have put up posters inside buses and at parks, where the city has erected signs.

There have been more fliers printed to hand out at city parks offices and rack cards displayed at visitor industry locations, and a community television production. The campaign has included beach cleanups and face-to-face educational events at parks.

More community groups need to pick up the baton and consider extending the reach further through promotional messages targeting tourists, ads for a wide audience and social media chatter.

It would be wise for Oahu — where the dense population and high visitor traffic make the problem especially relevant — to get out in front of the issue and make this county's ban work well. The message to broadcast is that Oahu beaches are a precious resource that all should want to protect.

And with any luck, this city as well as Hawaii island can persuade the rest of the state to join in, too.

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