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What's Up: Hiawatha ready to go smoke-free next month

People who have stayed away from the Hiawatha Restaurant & Lounge because the smoke gets in their eyes might want reconsider revisiting the establishment, starting next month.

The popular restaurant and bar at 713 Grant St. in Wausau will voluntarily go smoke-free as of May 1. The move is a response to many patrons' wishes and likely will change perceptions of the establishment by some who think of it as a place to get "run-of-the-mill pub grub," said bartender Stephanie McColley.

"We've had a lot of customers who have asked us over the years and a lot of customers who don't come into the Hiawatha because it is so smoky," she said. "And for health reasons, because it's time.

"I think it's going to be a good business decision for us. Once we go smoke-free, people will put us up at a level that's higher than that pub grub food."

That's a change of course from three years ago, when the Hiawatha challenged the city to retain its right to allow smoking. In a response to a complaint, the business proved it received more than 50 percent of its sales from alcohol. That meant it met Wausau's definition of a tavern and not a restaurant, which would have made it subject to the city's smoking ban.

"I know a lot of businesses out there are fighting to stay a smoking environment. At the end of the day, we know it's eventually going to be statewide," McColley said of the growing push for a statewide ban on smoking in all workplaces.

"Quite frankly, I am a smoker, and I have been wanting to quit smoking. And I've gotten to the point where the only time I will smoke is when I'm behind the bar. For my health reasons alone, I'm really looking forward to it."

The Hiawatha doesn't want to alienate its customers who smoke, which is why it will be making the change when the weather is warm and smokers can go outside to the outdoor tiki bar seating area to light up.

"People can still smoke outdoors, so it's a nice, gradual time for us to begin the transition," McColley said. "We don't want to lose those customers, obviously."

What's up with the Tea Palace?

Owner Kou Lee recently sent a message to customers, alerting them that the business at 325 N. First Ave. in Wausau will close April 25 when its lease expires.

Lee opened her tea cafe in June 2006 to introduce Wausau to bubble tea, a beverage considered the "Chinese Cola" in Asian markets and which had caught on parts of California. Aside from being a place to sip the unusual drink and purchase a variety of loose-leaf teas, the Tea Palace became a gathering place for karaoke nights, birthday parties, poetry readings and fundraising events.

The cafe's final tea party is planned for April 24, when the Mayor's Youth Action Council will hold its final Acoustic Night there.

Lee plans to continue to sell bubble tea through kiosks at fairs and amusement parks, according to the

letter.

If you have local retail news or questions for business editor Mark Multer, call 845-0608, or e-mail mmulter@wdhprint.com.
