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Updated: 3/10/2009

Poll: Smoking ban has residents' support

By Eric Lindquist
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Though many bar owners still oppose Eau Claire's 8-month-old workplace smoking ban, a poll released Monday shows that city residents strongly support the law.

The poll of 400 likely Eau Claire voters found that 74 percent favor the smoke-free ordinance. Support was consistently strong across party and gender lines and among people of different age groups and from different sides of town.

"It's clear that Eau Claire loves this law," said Aaron Doeppers, regional director of the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, who was in Eau Claire Monday to discuss the poll results.

The survey also found that 77 percent of the people who go out to bars and restaurants at least once a week support the law, and that 69 percent believe the ban has worked well enough to keep in place.

The poll, conducted Feb. 23 to 25 by The Mellman Group and paid for by the advocacy group SmokeFree Wisconsin, has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.9 percentage points.

Despite the results, an Eau Claire tavern owner insisted the local ordinance has been bad for business.

Norm Dodge, owner of the Do-Dodge Inn at 1339 Menomonie St., said the ban is driving local residents to drink - outside of the city limits.

As a result of the ban, Eau Claire bars are suffering and bars in surrounding communities are booming, said Dodge, noting that business at his west side tavern is down more than 50 percent since the citywide ban took effect July 1.

His objections focus on minority rights. Just because a majority of people don't smoke doesn't mean they should be able to stop those who do from smoking in private businesses where the owners want to offer that option, Dodge said.

But smoke-free advocates argue that the right of people, including restaurant and bar employees, to breathe clean air is a higher priority.

The poll suggests the public agrees, as it indicates 82 percent of respondents believe secondhand smoke is a health hazard.

"Most people don't smoke and most people understand that secondhand smoke is a serious health hazard," said Katie Wilson, a member of Tobacco Free Partnership of Eau Claire County. "No wonder they're more likely to go out and enjoy themselves now that the city is smoke-free."

Eau Claire City Council member Dave Duax, a major advocate of the local ban, said he was pleased to see the strength of support for the ordinance but still would like to see a statewide workplace smoking ban.

Dodge acknowledged a statewide law would help to level the playing field with surrounding communities but said he doesn't believe it will ever pass in Wisconsin.

Rep. Jeff Smith, D-Eau Claire, disagreed, saying he believes a majority of legislators support a statewide ban and understand that the current patchwork of local ordinances isn't working. The only question remaining, he said, is whether the proposed ban will remain part of the budget or be voted on as a separate bill.

"This poll proves once again that we're overdue for passing a statewide ban," Smith said.
"The time is right."