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Editorial: Pass state workplace safety bill promptly

As if another reason to pass a statewide smoking ban were really necessary, a report last week from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cites a reduction in serious heart attacks after Pueblo, Colo., passed a ban in 2003.

The law banned smoking in public places and workplaces starting July 1, 2003. According to the CDC, Pueblo recorded 399 heart attack hospitalizations in the 18 months before the law took effect. During the next 18 months, the number dropped to 237 hospitalizations. Researchers also found that two nearby areas that did not ban smoking showed no significant decline in hospitalizations for heart attacks.

The debate has raged in Wisconsin for years. Community after community has tired of waiting for the state to act and passed local smoking bans. The time has come for legislators to stop talking and take a vote.

As these discussions have dragged on, more and more evidence has arisen regarding the harm that smoking and secondhand smoke do. More and more evidence has arisen regarding the health benefits to clearing the air.

This newspaper was among those that argued that business owners had the right to decide whether to ban smoking on their properties. The thought that free markets ought to rule has merit. At some point, however, the argument on behalf of public health becomes overwhelming, and a year ago we changed our position.

Only obstinate special interests and the lawmakers they fund are left standing between the public and clean air. Unfortunately, those opponents have included leaders in the state Assembly and Senate, and they have managed to stop the Smoke-Free Workplace Bill time and again.

This year, new leadership in the Assembly backed by a determined governor may be able to topple the last resistance and press for a vote. Even the most ardent opponents have begun to face the inevitability of a ban and pushed to delay implementation until 2010 and then 2011.

Enough talk. Business owners have seen this coming for years. The new Legislature takes office Tuesday; smoke-free workplace legislation should be on the governor's desk by winter's end.
