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Editorial

Cutting down the haze

It's time. The arguments against a comprehensive statewide smoking ban are hollow. Public health demands enactment.

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The state Legislature has shamefully dithered, and 37 Wisconsin communities now have some variation of a smoking ban. So, of course, bars and restaurants there have all boarded up their windows and gone bust.

Oh, right. They haven't.

In fact, some communities that were going to siphon off all the smokers' business after Madison went smoke free in 2005 have opted to copy their neighbor instead. That would be Monona, Middleton and Fitchburg.

This would seem to indicate that, far from reaping rewards from Madison's ban, these communities and their businesses saw some benefit from going smokeless.

State Sen. Fred Risser (D-Madison), among others, notes the trend as he readies another smoking ban bill. Rep. Jon Richards (D-Milwaukee), chairman of the health and health care committee, will introduce the Assembly version. They will introduce their bill at the end of the month.

Both houses should approve a comprehensive statewide ban. The governor has said he favors one.

One obstacle last year was Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker (D-Weston), who didn't let the bill come to the floor. The Senate's Democratic caucus should make it clear to their leader that being the obstacle again will be unacceptable.

It's time.

No doubt, the same resistance will surface from the tavern industry. Don't be distracted. This is not about the right of business owners to run their businesses as they please. It's about the right of employees to enjoy a safe work environment - not having to choose between a livelihood and health. And we should no more allow business owners to inflict smoke on employees and patrons than we would allow them to expose folks to asbestos or other harmful substances.

The bill, Risser and Richards say, will not allow exemptions and will impose a short transition period. This is as it should be.

The goal here should be public health, and there's scant room for compromise there.

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