



March 13, 2009

Editorial: Time for state to pass smoking ban

There is an unmistakable irony that Virginia, the cradle of the tobacco industry, now has stricter smoking laws than Wisconsin.

On Monday Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine signed a statewide ban on smoking in restaurants and bars in a state that is often synonymous with tobacco. Settlers at Jamestown built their economy on tobacco in 1612 and the state is the home of Philip Morris and its Marlboro cigarette factory, the world's largest.

The fact that Virginia passed a tobacco ban while Wisconsin continues to debate the issue is stunning and embarrassing in light of the undeniable public health risks that second-hand smoke poses. The issue has confounded the Wisconsin Legislature, with a smoking ban bill dying in 2007. Fortunately, the state Legislature can correct that by passing a provision in Gov. Jim Doyle's budget bill that would ban smoking in public places, including restaurants, bars and bowling alleys. The association representing restaurants supports a smoking ban, leaving the tavern league as the only opposition.

The tavern league's arguments against a smoking ban are based on predictions of financial calamity for their industry and the infringement on personal rights of business owners. While we are sympathetic, we must reject the arguments in favor of a greater good that a statewide ban would represent to the health of Wisconsin residents. Need evidence? A recent report from Centers of Disease Control and Prevention tracks the outcome of a smoking ban passed in Pueblo, Colo in 2003.

The study shows that heart attack hospitalizations in Pueblo decreased by 41 percent in the three years following the enacting of a municipal law that banned smoking in workplaces and public places. Researchers also found that two nearby areas that did not ban smoking showed no significant decline in hospitalizations for heart attacks

Meanwhile, the debate continues in Wisconsin leading to a patchwork of community initiated smoking bans, the most recent enacted in Fond du Lac. While Wisconsin plays Russian Roulette on the issue, 24 states including our neighbors in Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois have enacted smoking bans.

Enough.

The time has come to pass a comprehensive, statewide smoking ban for the sake of competitive balance in the hospitality industry and more importantly for the sake of public health.

While we normally do not approve of policy legislation embedded in the budget bill, the smoking ban is an exception we embrace to bring the debate to an end for the sake of a healthier Wisconsin.
