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Restaurant makes smoke-free choice

Owner says decision is good for business

*By Bob Petrie
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Bill Dawson, owner of Brisco County Wood Grill, said the decision to ban smoking in his bar and restaurant was easy.

Quite simply, Dawson was losing business. People would regularly wait for tables in the nonsmoking seating area at Brisco County, and leave if the wait got too long. Meanwhile, the restaurant's smoking section, connected to the bar, sat three-quarters empty.

"It was tough to have people waiting and actually leaving when I had open tables," said Dawson, who went 100 percent smoke-free on Feb. 1 after nearly 10 years in business.

A month into the nonsmoking policy, Dawson says it's working out well at Brisco County, 539 Riverfront Drive, which seats about 220 people. The smokers generally understand the new ban and go outside to light up, and customers inside say they breathe better.

"We've heard a lot of great comments on us doing it, so that's been nice," Dawson said. "Obviously, we've had some who have been a little disturbed (about the ban) who are upset with us, but overall, it's been a smart move for us."

Brisco County is among a growing number of eating, drinking and lodging businesses that have gone smoke-free in the past eight years in Sheboygan County, said Bruce Kress, the county's environmental health supervisor. About 120 smoke-free establishments were on the list as of last November.

"They (customers) really appreciate it," Kress said of the nonsmoking businesses. "It's a cleaner atmosphere for themselves."

Kress, whose job includes regular food safety testing at places that serve food, also surveys businesses on their smoking policies as part of his regular visits, with the suggestion that they try going smoke-free for health and business reasons.

"They won't be losing money," Kress said. "If you have a person sitting there who's having 10 cups of coffee and 10 cigarettes and reading the paper and you have people waiting for that table, you're losing money."

The issue of creating a statewide smoking ban in public places in Wisconsin — smoldering for years — has flared up again in recent weeks, following Gov. Jim Doyle's attempt to include it as part of the 2009-11 state budget.

Currently, some cities have taken up the issue and passed municipal smoking bans in bars, restaurants and public places, but Doyle thinks that banning smoking statewide would make it fair for all establishments.

"The experience of cities that have had the ban go into place is that for most taverns there is actually an increase in business, but for those that sit right on the border of another community, they have been

very unfairly burdened by the patchwork (ordinances)," Doyle said in a recent interview with state reporters, including The Sheboygan Press.

"To me, we just ought to do it statewide," Doyle said.

Dawson said he wanted to take Brisco County smoke-free some time ago, but was waiting for the state to pass a ban to make the decision easier for him. Finally, he got tired of the delay and did it on his own, telling his customers in advance.

"Obviously they were not pulling the trigger on that as quickly as I would have liked them to do," he said.

Several customers interviewed recently in the bar area of Brisco County said they appreciate the smoke-free atmosphere.

"It's the best thing for Sheboygan," said Keith Robel, 32, of Sheboygan, a nonsmoker. "Unfortunately, we're behind the times. All restaurants should be this way."

Rich Gruenke, 61, of Sheboygan, another nonsmoker, also likes the new policy at Brisco County.

"I don't avoid the places that do have smoking, but it's a nice environment not to have the smoke here," said Gruenke, though he believes it should be up to business owners, not state officials, to decide smoking bans.

Tim Gorges, 38, who describes himself as an occasional social smoker, said Sheboygan is "a good model" for how the marketplace can create a balance of smoking and nonsmoking establishments.

"Some businesses are getting the business because they allow smoking, and others are getting the business because they're not," said Gorges, of Sheboygan, while sipping a drink at Brisco County. "I really see that model really working in Sheboygan."

Kress, the county health official, prefers a statewide smoking ban to help make it uniform, though he adds that many restaurants who have gone smoke-free have seen business increase.

"I haven't had one change back, and this has been going for eight years," he said.

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Additional Facts

Smoke-free businesses

To view a list of smoke-free drinking, dining and lodging establishments in Sheboygan County, go to www.co.sheboygan.wi.us and click on the Health and Human Services Division of Public Health page. A link to the list, updated through November 2008, appears at the bottom of the Web page.
