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Wisconsin Senate almost there to clean air

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A bill to ban smoking inside bars and restaurants across Wisconsin gained a burst of momentum this week.

Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker, D-Weston, said he plans to bring the bill to the floor of the Senate by May 13.

This is huge -- so long as the bill isn't loaded up with loopholes before passage.

Decker and others refused to give the bill a floor vote last year, even though it appeared to have plenty of support to pass.

No doubt public pressure, which has been building for years now, is helping move this sensible public health rule forward. Yet nothing is certain given the power of the Wisconsin Tavern League and opposition from key lawmakers with short-sighted vision.

For anyone who can look even a few years into the future, it's obvious that indoor smoking is headed for the ashtray of history. Nonsmokers don't like the annoyance of breathing in smoke while eating or drinking. And many service industry workers -- including those who smoke -- say they much prefer serving food and beverages in clean air so their clothes and hair don't stink at the end of their shifts.

Some workers also report improved health.

Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois and a growing list of states ban smoking in bars and restaurants. And here in Wisconsin, local communities are approving their own bans in lieu of state action.

Smokers in cities with bans, including Madison, have come to accept the future. They now realize it's no big deal to step outside for a few minutes to light up.

The public should hold Decker and his Senate colleagues to the May 13 deadline. Approve the ban and send it on to the Assembly, then on to the governor's desk.

Gov. Jim Doyle has said for years now he'll sign it.

Wisconsin is almost there to cleaner air. Decker's pledge to bring the ban to the Senate floor this month is a positive sign -- so long as no last-minute loopholes are attached to the bill to weaken it.

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