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Smoke ban should come sooner

A Wisconsin State Journal editorial
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Congratulations to state leaders for reaching agreement on an indoor smoking ban affecting all workplaces, including bars and restaurants.

It's been a long time coming.

Key negotiators on the legislation, including Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Waunakee, deserve credit for pulling such divergent groups as the Wisconsin Tavern League and SmokeFree Wisconsin into the deal. The bill announced Thursday does a lot of things right.

But one simple tweak would make the proposal much better: Move up the start date to six months from now, rather than waiting more than a year for the ban to kick in.

Tavern owners say they need a year to prepare for the ban, which is set to begin July 5, 2010. But that argument is weak.

Tavern owners have known for years now that a statewide smoking ban was in their futures. It was only a matter of time, given the growing movement across Wisconsin and the nation to pass smoking bans at the state and local levels.

Neighboring Iowa, Minnesota and Illinois all have statewide bans, and none of them waited nearly so long for their bans to take effect.

Tavern owners also suggest they need more than a year to prepare for the ban so that the economy can improve. But this assumes the smoking ban will hurt their businesses.

To the contrary, the smoking ban has been no big deal to their bottom lines of most Madison bars and restaurants. In some cases, revenue has improved.

Smokers in Madison and other communities with local bans have found it easy to step outside before lighting up. And many bars cater to smokers with outdoor patios with heaters in winter.

The only bars in Madison that were hurt economically by the smoking ban were those on the city's edges that catered to a heavy-smoking clientele and had to compete with nearby bars in other municipalities that still allowed indoor smoking.

But a statewide smoking ban requires *all* taverns to ban indoor smoking. So the playing field for businesses is level.

Overall, the compromise announced Thursday is a strong one that deserves swift legislative approval next week. But an amendment

moving the start date to a half year from now is reasonable and should be accepted by all sides.

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