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Smokers, tavern owners expect little impact from statewide smoking ban

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Oshkosh bar patrons and tavern owners expect people will still flock to local taverns even if they have to stand outside when it's time to light up.

Wisconsin lawmakers are expected to debate a proposed statewide ban on smoking in workplaces today. The proposed ban, which lawmakers are expected to pass this week, would require almost all workplaces, including taverns and restaurants, to go smoke free starting in July 2010.

Patty Pierce said, she'll still visit LeRoy's Bar on Knapp Street when she wants a mid-afternoon drink, However she won't enjoy her cigarette from the comfort of her bar stool.

"I'll just go out and smoke in my car and come back in," the Oshkosh woman said. Tavern owners agree that if the smoking ban is passed, it will affect tavern business, but what kind of impact it will have is anybody's guess. Owners agree that while some new customers may emerge, they may lose some customers as a result of smokers choosing to stay home.

As a result tavern owners said Oshkosh residents may see some taverns closing their doors for good, even though studies have shown smoking bans do not have a negative effect on business.

"Some people will stay home and drink," said Cindy Baehman, owner of LeRoy's Bar. "They're die-hard smokers."

A March 2009 report by Indiana University's Center for Health Policy found that 47 of 49 studies concluded smoke-free regulations hadn't hurt the hospitality industry.

"There might be a slight downturn while people start getting used to it, but I don't think there will be any cause of alarm or worry," said Emily Dieringer, a health educator with the Winnebago County Tobacco/Drug Free Communities Coalition.

Smokers would face fines of up to \$250 and bar owners who don't try to stop smokers would get a warning and a \$100 fine for a second offense.

Local governments could not pass any regulations stricter than the statewide ban except on their own property.

Pat Purtell, who owns Terry's Lounge, 668 N. Main St., said he hopes officials with the city of Oshkosh do not enact regulations that would prohibit patrons from smoking on outdoor patios or while standing on the sidewalk outside the tavern.

"People have a right to clean air, but this is still American," Purtell said. "If they want to have a cigarette, they should be able to go outside."

Marjean Gabel, a bartender at Packers Pub on West 20th Avenue said she thinks there will be customers who will not like the changes even if they have the option of using an outdoor patio or having

their cigarette while standing outside the tavern.

"I'm sure there will be a lot of angry customers that we'll have to deal with," Gable said.

Phil Schettl isn't happy with the idea of the proposed smoking ban, but he said it would merely be an inconvenience that he will deal with.

However, the Oshkosh man said a smoking ban would not mean a significant change in his behavior. He said he has never smoked in restaurants, does not smoke at home while eating and cannot smoke at work.

If the ban went into effect, he would just add taverns to the list as another place he couldn't enjoy a cigarette.

"You come in and you want to have a couple of cold ones and a smoke," Schettl said. "I'll still stop and have my beers. I'll just have my cigarette before I come in."
