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Statewide smoking ban on fast track; Doyle could get bill by next week

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After years of failed attempts by supporters, a tough statewide smoking ban could be headed to Gov. Jim Doyle's desk as early as next week.

The bill, which would end smoking in bars and restaurants in Wisconsin, could be taken up by both the state Assembly and Senate as early as May 13.

In a burst of action, senators held a hearing on the bill Tuesday and an Assembly committee is scheduled to hold a hearing today, with votes expected by both committees later this week.

"It's very exciting," said Marilyn Townsend, a village of Shorewood Hills trustee who lost both of her parents to smoking-related illnesses. "There are many people who are trying to quit, and this would help them."

Townsend was one of dozens who showed up to testify both for and against a ban on Tuesday, with advocates arguing it would save both lives and health-care costs. Tavern and tobacco store owners argued the ban would crush their livelihoods. Outside the hearing room, both sides searched for a compromise that could clear the Legislature.

As it now stands, the bill is identical to one that Doyle, also a ban supporter, inserted into the state budget. The proposal would ban smoking in almost every workplace, with exceptions for people who live in assisted living facilities and for hotels, which could designate one-quarter of their rooms as available for smoking. The bill would allow two months to implement the ban.

Chris Marsicano, co-owner of the Village Supper Club in Delavan, said that with the weak economy, sales are already down at a business that has been in his family for 44 years.

"We're just afraid that with the imposition of a smoking ban, we're accelerating that," said Marsicano, a regional vice president for the Tavern League of Wisconsin.

Scott Stenger, a lobbyist for the Tavern League, said the group wants several changes: at least a year for implementation, protection of outdoor smoking areas from local ordinances, and lower fines than the current bill. It calls for fines of \$25 to \$50 for the first violation, \$50 to \$100 for the second and \$100 to \$250 for third and additional violations.

But Sen. Fred. Risser, D-Madison, a co-author of the bill, said state government and Wisconsin businesses pay enormous health-care costs

because of smoking and a smoking ban shouldn't face further delay. "The time has come now to provide a healthy environment for our workers and patrons alike," he said.

The bill resurrects a familiar argument for local residents — whether to provide an exemption for cigar bars or tobacco shops — as the city of Madison ultimately did after passing its smoking ordinance in 2005. Jeff Steinbock, owner of Uhle Tobacco Co., said his long-time Milwaukee business could shut down if an exemption isn't provided.

"Nobody expects a smoke-free environment when they enter a tobacco shop or a cigar shop," Steinbock said.

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