

OUR VIEW

Is smoking ban on the horizon?

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Gov. Jim Doyle has launched a major anti-smoking initiative. It includes a steep increase in the cigarette tax and an attempt to implement a statewide smoking ban in public buildings, businesses and restaurants.

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A new survey shows where public sentiment is going. A poll of 500 state residents conducted by telephone Feb. 17-19 found that nearly two-thirds of state residents support a statewide ban on smoking in all workplaces — including bars and restaurants.

Locally, Dr. Paul McGinnis is a big advocate for eliminating public smoking.

"This is not about being Republican or Democrat," McGinnis said. "This is about doing something we know will save lives and make life better for everyone" — and he has the statistics to support his state-

ment.

Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have some sort of smoking bans. A number of Wisconsin communities and counties also have bans, including Madison, which prohibits smoking in taverns.

Bars, of course, are always the toughest sell for smoking bans. The fact is, a large percentage of bar customers smoke. The businesses are also represented by a strong lobby, the Tavern League of Wisconsin. The Tavern League would apparently accept a statewide smoking ban that exempts its members.

The U.S. Surgeon General said that exposure to secondhand smoke increases the risk of heart disease for nonsmokers by 25 to 30 percent — and increases nonsmokers' lung cancer risk by 20 percent to 30 percent.

As the evidence continues to mount, it is becoming

apparent that some sort of smoking ban is in the future — the question is when and how extensive. Will it include bars or start out excluding certain businesses?

Opponents of smoking bans argue that smoking is legal. A ban infringes on individual rights. But the right to smoke becomes blurred when the problems also impact a non-smoking neighbor. We may have the right to smoke, but no one has the right to endanger someone else's health.

Doyle's tax increase is also an attempt to stop young people from starting to smoke. A ban on smoking, which is inevitable at some point, is aimed at protecting non-smokers. And, if you look at the numbers, non-smokers outnumber smokers by a huge number.

Doyle said, "Does anybody really doubt where history is moving on this?"