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State must catch up with neighbors, pass smoking ban

Imagine, for a moment, if it were legal to fire guns in public buildings in Wisconsin.

While enjoying a beer, a burger or a football game, a state resident had the right to wave his or her loaded firearm around and shoot off a couple of rounds in celebration - or just for the heck of it.

While health authorities considered indoor gun-firing dangerous and some restrictions had been enacted, it was still legal to blast your six-shooter into the ceiling of a bar or bowling alley if you wished. Even in restaurants, there often were "shooting" and "no-shooting" sections.

Sometimes the gunfire had unfortunate results, but the people who were maimed or killed typically were doing the shooting. Sure, once in a while people who weren't firing their guns indoors - maybe even people minding their own business in the "no-shooting" section - came home smelling like gunpowder or even took a bullet. But that's the price of freedom, right? Those folks could've dined elsewhere if they thought the restaurant was dangerous. And even the employees of such establishments could get other jobs if they wanted. After all, no one was holding a gun to their heads.

Obviously, this scenario is

ridiculous. Even the most ardent Second Amendment absolutist would acknowledge it would be a bad idea to allow willy-nilly gunfire in eateries, taverns or other workplaces. Guns are meant to be handled safely and respected, not used to threaten the lives of their owners or others - even unintentionally.

Which brings us to a dangerous practice that actually is legal in Wisconsin: smoking in public buildings. A bill pending in the state Legislature would ban smoking in virtually all indoor public areas, including bars and restaurants. That's a step taken by 22 other states, including Minnesota and Illinois.

It's unfortunate Wisconsin is lagging behind its neighbors in enacting legislation that would protect the health of workers, nonsmokers and smokers. We agree with Gov. Jim Doyle, who said Monday that "Wisconsin should not become the ashtray of the Midwest." Doyle is trying to increase momentum for the proposed smoking ban, and we join him in urging lawmakers to quickly pass the bill as a matter of public health.

To return briefly to firearms, as much as guns - especially in the hands of criminals - worry many people, they cause far fewer deaths than cigarettes. According to the National Safety Council, fewer than 30,000 Americans died because of firearms in 2004; when murders and suicides are excluded, the total dwindles to about 1,200.

Meanwhile, smoking kills more than 400,000 Americans each year (according to the federal Centers for Disease Control), while secondhand smoke kills an

estimated 50,000 Americans annually (according to the American Lung Association).

The primary obstacle to the smoking ban comes from tavern owners, who worry it will harm their businesses. However, it's tobacco use, not alcohol consumption, that's being banned: In other words, it's unlikely adults who want to enjoy a bit of Milwaukee's finest will be deterred by the ban. If they want to pollute their lungs as well, they can simply step outside.

In fact, a statewide smoking ban is better for small businesses than the current patchwork of local bans. For example, when the city of Eau Claire enacted a restaurant smoking ban in 2000, business owners were worried that smokers would flee to competing businesses in neighboring communities. Prohibiting smoking in all restaurants, bars and other businesses across Wisconsin would snuff out this argument.

A ban also would reduce the risk of secondhand smoke to thousands of nonsmoking state residents - including bartenders, waitresses and waiters, and other workers - and perhaps give the state's roughly 900,000 smokers another reason to quit. The ban wouldn't strip anyone's rights at the point of a gun; instead it would help prevent them from being stripped of their lives.

- Tom Giffey, editorial page editor