

Capital Times

Vote for a smoking ban

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Communities across Wisconsin are voting to go smoke-free, confirming that it is not just Madison that thinks it is time to prohibit smoking in bars, restaurants and other workplaces.

Marshfield is the most recent to do so, voting by a remarkable 64-36 margin in favor of a public smoking ban.

As it turns out, Marshfield is pretty representative, at least if a new poll is to be believed.

According to the survey commissioned by supporters of a statewide smoking ban, 69 percent of Wisconsinites now favor the adoption of smoke-free policies. That's up five percentage points since a similar poll of Wisconsin residents was conducted last year.

Of course, the whiners are still whining about how it is wrong for government to take the lead on behalf of public health. And they have been loud enough, so far, to prevent legislative action on a statewide ban, which would keep pace with bans enacted in neighboring states.

The opponents of a statewide ban like to claim they are representing a silent majority of smokers and non-smokers who want the state to butt out of such matters.

Ryan Evans, a leader of a group called Ban the Ban, is questioning how well the survey commissioned by the It's Time to Breathe Free Coalition has gauged sentiment statewide. The coalition includes the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and Smoke-Free Wisconsin.

Evans says a truer representation of what Wisconsinites think would be obtained by scheduling a statewide referendum on the issue.

We agree.

Business interests have so far succeeded in preventing legislative action on a statewide smoking ban. As a result, Madison, Eau Claire, Fitchburg and other communities across the state have implemented local bans. The uneven implementation of the restrictions has been problematic, especially for tavern owners in towns with bans who must compete with bars in neighboring communities where smoking is still allowed.

Ultimately, we'd like to see the state be a lot more proactive when it comes to a smoking ban. For instance, far more focus should be placed on negotiations that might get Indian casinos to accept a voluntary ban.

But the bottom line is clear: A statewide ban is better for public health and it's better for tavern owners -- for whom this newspaper maintains sympathy because they are, by and large, local small businessmen and women who contribute a great deal to the cities, villages and towns where they are located.

So, yes, by all means, let's look for a way to hold a statewide referendum. As Alison Prange, Wisconsin government relations director for the American Cancer Society, says, "The people of Wisconsin are clear. They want a statewide smoke-free law and are moving forward to get it."

But how do we get from the people wanting a ban to making the change?

Wisconsin does not have standard mechanisms for proposition votes like those in California and other states, so perhaps a referendum would be only advisory. (We're opposed to going the constitutional amendment route because we just don't think that restricting cigarette smoking rises to the level of a constitutional matter.)

A referendum of some kind makes sense, however -- if only as another vehicle for pressuring legislators to get a whole lot more serious about this serious issue. Evans and other foes of a smoking ban are bluffing when they say they want to have the voters decide this issue.

Indeed, if the people are asked to weigh in on a smoking ban, they will decide as the people in Marshfield did on April 1: It's time.