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Editorial: Secondhand smoke risk is too great for further state delay

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January 22, 2008

It's time for a smoke-free workplace. We recognize that, and so should Wisconsin lawmakers.

The "Breathe Free Wisconsin Act," Senate Bill 150, cleared a Senate committee on a 3-2 vote earlier this month. However, there are leaders, from both parties in the Senate and Assembly who are standing in the way of passage.

Advocates of the smoke-free workplace initiative are right to say that the ban is necessary to protect the health of people whose jobs involve working around tobacco smoke, such as waitresses, bartenders and inspectors who visit such establishments. They are also right when they point out that special accommodations to smokers make it more difficult to quit.

Supporters of a complete prohibition were outraged when the committee measure was amended to give bars and restaurants until 2010 to comply. Smoking in virtually all other indoor locations would be banned on the first day of the seventh month after the bill is signed and published, which could be later this year.

In the past we have opposed the smoking ban as overreaching interference into entrepreneurs' right to run their businesses as they see fit.

But we have been convinced that the health risk from secondhand smoke is simply too great for further delay. The Surgeon General has concluded that smoke-free workplace policies are the only effective way to do away with secondhand smoke exposure in the workplace.

While we would prefer sooner than later, setting the bar/restaurant enactment date for 2010 is a compromise that we can accept if that's what it takes to get it done. It would give business owners a little bit more than a year to prepare whatever changes they feel are necessary to remain competitive.

It troubles us that legislative leaders from both parties, seem content to let this issue languish.

Assembly Speaker Mike Huebsch, R-West Salem, has indicated that the compromise measure probably won't be put up for a vote in his house. That's just unacceptable; lawmakers can't duck a vote on an issue this important.

Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker, D-Weston, said last week that he could support a compromise that establishes an immediate ban on smoking at restaurants, but give taverns all the way until April 2011 to comply. He also supported allowing taverns to set aside a separate, non-serviced, ventilated room for smokers. That's taking the spirit of compromise a bit too far.

It's time for lawmakers to show they care as much about the public health as the health of special interest groups.

A patchwork of local smoking bans has also stressed the marketplace to the point where the Wisconsin Restaurant Association has asked for a statewide ban to create a "level playing field" that consumers can't avoid simply by crossing city limits.

We agree there should be a level playing field. Wisconsin should join 22 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico and pass the smoke-free workplace rules.

And it should happen now, not later.

This editorial was originally published in the Green Bay Press-Gazette