



■ Our opinion

# Ban Smoking Statewide

Cigarette smoke kills and sickens people, smokers and non-smokers alike. While smokers have the right to light up, non-smokers effectively lose their right to breath clean air when they inhale secondhand smoke. For many people, secondhand smoke is a real threat to their health, one that does them harm through no fault of their own. Bartenders, wait staff, and many other hard-working citizens are bombarded by clouds of smoke when they punch the clock. They breathe filth. Their clothes stink at the end of their shift. Non-smokers who visit these establishments are similarly force-fed airborne toxins.

Some argue that it should be up to the business owner to set these policies, that people should get a different job if they don't like their current work environment, that customers shouldn't frequent smoky establishments if they don't like smoke. These arguments are just plain lousy. Following that same logic, business owners should be allowed to serve rotten meat on rusty plates. In some cases, we'd argue, state oversight is needed to ensure a healthy society. And this, no doubt, is one of those cases.

In places like Illinois and Minnesota, people have supported and elected officials who had the courage to ban smoking in public buildings and the work place. Several major Wisconsin cities have already done so, but this creates a patchwork system and an uneven business landscape, like the one here in the greater Madison Metro area. The fairest and healthiest way for Wisconsin to eliminate smoking in public places is by enacting a statewide ban.

Governor Doyle has made this legislation one of his top priorities in his second term, and we urge the legislature to work with the governor to enact a statewide ban before the end of the current legislative session, which will end in March. "It's only a matter of time before the whole country goes smoke free," said Doyle last week in support of the measure. "Clean indoor air saves money in health care costs, improves public health, and most importantly, it saves lives."

Although Doyle is on the right track with this issue, legislators on both sides of the aisle appear wary to move the bill forward. Before passing the legislation in committee last week, the Senate watered it down by including delays for enacting the ban in taverns and restaurants. While a public smoking ban would begin in 2009, bars and eateries would have until 2010 to go smoke-free. Aaron Doeppers with the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids correctly criticized this concession, saying the legislators who supported this delay are more concerned with taking the easy route as opposed to doing what is right. Even if the full senate passes the legislation, its path through the assembly will be even tougher. Speaker Mike Huebsch agreed and was quick to downplay the legislation, saying passage in that chamber faced an uphill battle.

A smoking ban might not be the number one issue for Wisconsin voters this year, but as Governor Doyle correctly said, such a ban remains inevitable, even as change-fearing citizens and legislators purport it as the grim reaper of small businesses. Better to get it done now, we say. Bowling alleys and restaurants and (especially) taverns will be open for business in this state long after smokers move outside. If, however, our elected officials continue to delay passage, Wisconsin voters should replace them with officials who will cast the tough vote, do the right thing, and make Wisconsin's public places smoke-free.

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