

Don't blow chance for state smoking ban

By the Wisconsin State Journal

With the public's health at stake, Wisconsin cannot afford to let this opportunity go up in smoke. The chance to gain a statewide smoking ban in public buildings and workplaces, including restaurants and bars, is too important to be lost in disagreements over details.

Lawmakers and Gov. Jim Doyle should reach a compromise and put a smoking ban in place.

We prefer the governor's simple, clean proposal to ban smoking in all indoor public places statewide. The well-documented risks to public health posed by secondhand smoke make a ban the right policy, and Doyle's plan would provide a level playing field for businesses.

However, the governor has conceded that opposition to his plan, led by bar owners, makes it unlikely the ban will pass the legislature without compromise.

The top candidate for a compromise appears to be an exemption for bars.

But exempting bars would subject nonsmoking customers to health hazards, and leave bar employees unprotected, all without giving them a say in the outcome.

A better possibility for compromise is a statewide smoking ban covering all bars and restaurants, all workplaces and all public buildings but with a provision that allows a municipality or county to opt out.

The opt-out would only be effective if a majority of local voters agreed in a referendum.

The people would get to decide.

If voters approved an opt-out proposal, the local government would then be free to adopt its own smoking regulations.

This compromise offers the advantage of a statewide public health policy declaring that smoking in all public indoor places is prohibited. And it allows for local control, by the people, of any exceptions.

Nebraska's legislature is considering a similar compromise for its statewide smoking ban.

Unwanted exposure to secondhand smoke is not only an annoyance, it is a health hazard. The increased risk of heart disease and lung cancer for nonsmoking employees is especially worrisome. As the smoking ban in Madison has demonstrated, it is not too much to require smokers to step outside. Businesses are even accommodating smokers with comfortable outdoor smoking areas.

In the face of this evidence, it is important for Wisconsin to take a stand to protect public health. But if compromise is necessary, the best option is to let the people decide on any exceptions.

Doyle and lawmakers should find a common ground that gives Wisconsin the public health policy — it needs a statewide smoking ban.