

[Back](#)

Editorial: Smoking-ban deal less than satisfying

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As much as we like it when the Legislature comes to a compromise on divisive issues, we find the recent deal on a workplace smoking ban to be less than satisfying.

That's because the compromise — if both the Senate and Assembly pass it and Gov. Doyle signs it — won't be a statewide ban on smoking in the workplace, not at least for another year.

The Senate committee that narrowly advanced the measure last week decided to compromise and give bars and restaurants a full year to put up "no smoking" signs. Why the people who work in these places — and are subjected to secondhand smoke — should receive less protection and consideration than do other workers is beyond us.

Here's one answer: The Tavern League Of Wisconsin has lobbied long and loud against a workplace smoking ban and it appears some in the Legislature have listened. But they're not listening to the 70 percent of Wisconsin residents who want a workplace smoking ban.

Once again, money talks and common sense walks.

The Senate committee that passed the compromise has also proposed an exemption for businesses operated by manufacturers, wholesalers and distributors of tobacco products, thus opening the door for "cigarette bars" operated by tobacco companies. This clearly doesn't allow for a level playing field — which a complete statewide ban would. It also seems to be another cave-in to the tobacco lobbyists and their money.

The levelheaded members of the state Senate should lead the fight to get this provision out of the bill.

The Senate leadership could schedule the bill for floor debate and action in the coming weeks. But its fate in the Assembly is uncertain. Speaker Mike Huebsch, a Republican from West Salem, doesn't feel inclined to bring the bill to a vote in the Assembly. How unfortunate that one lawmaker can hold such a worker safety bill hostage.

Huebsch should at least respect the people of Wisconsin enough to allow their representatives to vote on a bill of this magnitude.

As imperfect as the compromise bill is, it is still better than nothing. It should be passed — minus the completely wrong deal on cigarette bars.