

Editorial: Statewide smoking ban levels the playing field

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We hope the bold steps that Gov. Jim Doyle has proposed on smoking in Wisconsin find favor in the state Legislature.

Doyle's call for a statewide ban on smoking in the workplace and a \$1.25 increase in the tax on a pack of cigarettes will surely generate a possibly loud debate in the Capitol.

But the facts that can't be ignored are that smoking is bad for you; it costs the state millions of dollars a year for smoking-related illnesses and secondhand tobacco smoke is dangerous to those in the same room with it.

While the workplace smoking ban applies to all businesses open to the public, the most significant effect will be on bars and restaurants, which have fought past efforts to ban smoking in the workplace.

We applaud those that have voluntarily become smoke-free for giving their employees and patrons a safer environment.

Those who work in a tavern or restaurant should not have to put up with a known killer to earn a living.

Also, a statewide ban is the only "fair" way to do this because everyone is treated the same. This is far better than the current situation in which one community bans smoking and a neighboring one does not.

Even the staunchest opponents of a smoking ban would have to agree on the fairness of a statewide law.

The increase in cigarette taxes may be a tougher sell than the smoking ban. Already Republicans in the Legislature are lining up to oppose any tax increase. While no tax increase is welcome or pleasant, this is one that no one is forced to pay.

Doyle says it is one way the state can get the money it needs to pay the cost of smoking-related illnesses. And Doyle is planning to spend money on programs and efforts to help people who want to quit smoking. Part of this effort will come from Doyle's plan to refinance the bonds purchased using tobacco settlement money to generate \$600 million in cash, some of which would be used to pay for anti-smoking programs.

The tax hike will also serve as an incentive for many people to quit smoking, especially teenagers and those even younger.

In the end, the governor's proposal is more about workplace safety than anything else. Government has a duty to protect its citizens from dangers and secondhand smoke is dangerous.

We believe the studies that show the menace of secondhand smoke — and so must many others whose reason for not going to a certain bar or restaurant is the smoky environment inside.

Smokers, too, know these same dangers. How many times have you heard a smoker say he or she doesn't light up in the home or car, especially when others are present, but still want the right to smoke in a bar or restaurant.

But even with a statewide ban, people will still have the right to smoke, just not in the workplace.