

Adopt anti-smoking plan

Wisconsin State Journal editorial

SAT., JAN 27, 2007

The well-documented risks posed by secondhand smoke make it imperative that Wisconsin lawmakers approve Gov. Jim Doyle's proposal to ban smoking in indoor public places statewide, including restaurants and bars.

Lawmakers should also approve a significant increase in the state cigarette tax, though they should stop short of the governor's plan to hike the tax by \$1.25 a pack. A reasonable level would be the \$1-a-pack increase sought by a coalition of anti-smoking organizations.

A ban on smoking and a cigarette tax increase are necessary for Wisconsin to fulfill its responsibilities to protect the public health.

Doyle pointed Wisconsin in the right direction last week when he introduced his anti-smoking proposals. The list of states adopting bans on smoking in public places is growing, with Ohio and Arizona being the most recent. The reasons are clear.

Secondhand smoke is not only annoying but also hazardous. The U.S. surgeon general has reported that even casual exposure to secondhand smoke can have adverse effects on a nonsmoker's heart and circulatory system. Exposure to secondhand smoke in the workplace can significantly increase the risk of heart disease and lung cancer for nonsmoking employees.

In addition, statewide bans on smoking provide businesses and the public with uniform regulation, rather than a hodgepodge of local smoking bans, which now prevail in Wisconsin.

After all, if secondhand smoke is a public health issue in Madison, which has a smoking ban, it is also a public health issue in Middleton and Monona, which lack such bans.

The Wisconsin State Journal editorial board has previously supported a statewide smoking ban, though not one as strict as Doyle proposed. Our concern was that while nonsmokers should be free from secondhand smoke, smokers should also be free to find somewhere to light up.

However, we have been impressed with how Madison's strict smoking ban has worked out. Though smokers' freedom has been curtailed, they can still find accommodation in outdoor areas set aside for smoking. Some bars and restaurants have become adept at providing comfortable smoking areas, some of which are equipped with heaters during colder months.

Complaints have become fewer, and the benefits for the ever-growing majority of nonsmokers have been many.

We are now confident in supporting the governor's proposal.

We are also confident that the time is right for a \$1-a-pack cigarette tax increase, as long as lawmakers follow through with the governor's plan to dedicate the revenue to programs that help smokers quit and that cover the costs smoking adds to the health care system.

The tax increase would have the added benefit of raising the cost of cigarettes high enough to discourage young people from starting to smoke.

Lawmakers should act. Our health depends on it.