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Snuff the smoke out of bars statewide

A Wisconsin State Journal editorial
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Middleton's smoking ban kicked in last month.

Monona will ban smoking in bars and restaurants June 1.

Verona has set the start date of its prohibition on lighting up in taverns and eateries for Aug. 15. That's the same day Dane County's smoking ban takes effect in all towns and unincorporated areas.

This is more than just a trend in one county. It's Wisconsin's future.

Thirty-seven Wisconsin municipalities have adopted smoke-free ordinances with many more considering action soon. And at least a dozen of these communities ban smoking in all indoor workplaces, including restaurants and bars.

Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois ban smoking in all bars and restaurants. A total of 22 states do. So do the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. And Nebraska and Montana have approved bans that will begin later this year.

It's time for Wisconsin to catch up with its neighbors and nation for the sake of public health. It's time for a uniform law across the Badger State that gives patrons, workers and business owners a consistent expectation for clean indoor air.

Gov. Jim Doyle has been wisely and aggressively pushing a state ban. But he mistakenly inserted his policy proposal into the state budget, where it doesn't belong. That's because the smoking ban has little or no effect on state spending, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

The Legislature should advance the ban as a separate bill, giving it the full debate and review that the democratic process demands.

That process will show a dire need for action. And then Doyle can sign the bill into law with a quick start date.

Smoking bans in Madison and elsewhere have shown that bars and restaurants can do just fine with clean air, especially if their competitors have to abide by the same rules.

Smokers also have realized it's no big deal to step outside to light up a cigarette so other patrons aren't bothered. Some businesses have catered to smokers by installing outdoor decks that include heaters during winter.

Especially grateful are service industry workers who head home after shifts breathing easier and not reeking of smoke.

The world is quickly banishing indoor smoke to the ash tray of history. Wisconsin should pass a statewide smoking ban this year that snuffs it out for good.

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