

The Journal Times

MAKE A CONNECTION

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Opinion

Stub out the butts

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By The Journal Times Editorial Board

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There is every cause to rejoice and not one worthy of lament as we approach the almost certain passage of a statewide ban on public smoking.

Smoking ban opponents are raising the usual ghosts. A ban, worries the Tavern League of Wisconsin, will hurt businesses. A wealth of evidence says otherwise. In El Paso, Texas, for example, a smoking ban passed in 2002 had produced no effect on business one year later. Researchers from the Texas Department of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention measured sales tax revenue changes to come to that conclusion.

Indeed, the only lament around here may be at places such as Shillings in Racine and Chat's in Mount Pleasant which have already prohibited smoking and now will lose a competitive edge. Yet they still have a year because a legislative compromise with pro- and anti-smoking groups will delay the statewide ban until 2010. That, too, is acceptable, because a ban later is better than no ban at all and because the businesses do deserve time to prepare.

What bar and restaurant owners don't seem to consider amid their fears is the potential for increased business. We know that only about one-quarter of the Wisconsin population smokes. What we don't know is how many people stay out of establishments now because they don't want to inhale the odor of burning tobacco along with the aroma of their food, and it is perfectly plausible that nonsmokers will patronize taverns for those specialty sandwiches, succulent ribs and so forth.

We also know that a host of health benefits accompany smoking prohibitions. In Massachusetts, for example, a report by that state's public health department and the Harvard School of Public Health found that a statewide smoking ban dramatically accelerated the decrease in deaths from heart attack.

It is too bad that there isn't just a bit more flexibility in the bill before the Wisconsin Legislature. It would have been good to allow the creation of separate smoking rooms—not the smoking sections we have now that don't stop the movement of air, but separate rooms with separate ventilation systems. That would allow people to eat and smoke if they wish, and it would maintain smoking as an individual choice.

Indeed, choice has always been at the heart of the smoking ban debate. People may smoke, but no one should be forced to breathe tobacco smoke. Business owners should control what happens on their property, yet they should not be allowed to compromise public health. It is true that people can avoid establishments which allow smoking, but that becomes difficult or impossible when one is traveling, and of course employees can't avoid breathing tobacco smoke at all.

The only lament we have is that the ban took so long to become reality.

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