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Wisconsin makes healthful choice

R-E Editorial Board

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Wisconsin took an important step last week when the governor signed an indoor smoking ban into law. The haze will linger until July 2010, however.

Minnesota's smoking ban — now nearly 20 months old — took effect a few months after passage. We think that was adequate time for businesses to adjust.

Wisconsin lawmakers opted to give tavern owners almost 14 months, and that compromise probably was essential to the bill's passage. The most important thing is that the Assembly and Senate passed a ban that will protect workers from secondhand smoke.

Twenty-five states — including Illinois, Minnesota and Iowa, which share a border with Wisconsin — have smoking bans. And they're working.

Health assessments of nonsmoking Minnesotans who once worked in smoke-filled businesses prove it. State health officials had volunteers go through a myriad of tests before the ban took effect and then a year after the ban. The study showed that individuals' overall health (and specifically such things as lung capacity and blood quality) improved over 12 months once secondhand smoke disappeared from their lives.

Opponents of Wisconsin's smoking ban argued that people who didn't want to work in a tavern or anywhere else where smoking was allowed, could find other work. We counter that no worker should have to choose between health and a paycheck, especially in the current recession.

As we stated in January when we urged Wisconsin to ban indoor smoking, economics alone made passage imperative. Wisconsin taxpayers spent nearly \$500 million annually in Medicaid costs due to smoking. Cutting those costs can only help fill the budget gap. Plus, a healthy work force is essential to a healthy state economy.

Lobbyists gained a few concessions, making Wisconsin's law a bit more lax than Minnesota's. Existing cigar bars and specialty tobacco shops are exempt from the ban, for example. Taverns and bars also can have outdoor smoking areas.

The compromises were worth it, and Wisconsin residents got what polls indicated they overwhelmingly wanted — a smoke-free working environment.

Adopting a statewide ban was the right and inevitable thing to do.