

Editorial: Bar owners must buy into smoking law

Former Marshfield Mayor Butch Duerr figures it's not fair.

The Viaduct Bar he runs with his wife, Lou, is just inside the Marathon County line. And the Marathon County Board of Health is pushing for a countywide ban on smoking in workplaces.

If that happens, places just outside Marathon County, such as Casa Loma & Bistro in Wood County -- less than half a mile away from the Viaduct -- might draw his customers like a magnet, Duerr fears.

Smoking bans in Wausau and Stevens Point clear the air in restaurants but allow smoking to continue in taverns. A similar proposal failed in Wisconsin Rapids. Other area municipalities have enacted their own ordinances, but they are so riddled with exemptions they're ineffective.

Across central Wisconsin as in the rest of the state, a map of the areas covered by smoking bans is the reverse of a slice of Swiss cheese. There are 30 local smoking bans in place, but smoking is allowed everywhere else.

That's the way the Tavern League of Wisconsin wants it, because most of its members think that if they went smoke-free, their businesses would suffer huge income losses.

Significantly, though, the Wisconsin Restaurant Association's board of directors voted 36-1 for a statewide ban on workplace smoking. It has read the fortune cookies and realizes that the days when businesses can set their own policies on smoking are in the past.

A statewide ban would level the playing field, the WRA thinks, because most local smoking bans excuse taverns and give them a competitive edge.

And they're right.

Clearly it's time to enact a law that's fair to all businesses by treating them all the same and banning smoking where people work -- including taverns, bowling alleys and restaurants.

As we've said before, this is a health issue. Tobacco smoke is laced with cancer-causing chemicals. If smokers want to ingest them in their own homes, they're free to. But exposing others isn't just rude, it's life-endangering.

Given the Legislature's track record -- members need to visit the wizard and find enough courage to stand up to the Tavern league -- it's probably wise for Marathon County to pursue a countywide ban.

If smoking is banned in all Marathon County workplaces, Duerr still will have his problem. But business owners in Wausau won't be complaining about losing business to Weston or Rothschild.

But the people who really need to get the message are the Tavern League of Wisconsin and its members.

To them we say: Three-fourths of the adults in Wisconsin are non-smokers. You're losing a lot of sales because people don't like smelling like chimneys and don't want to risk their lives just to have a cocktail. They think your barrooms are disgusting. They don't want to go there.

If your plan doesn't include bringing in new crowds of customers to eat, play darts and drink some beer, then you're planning to go bankrupt as the number of smokers dwindles.

That's a losing strategy.

If the Tavern League of Wisconsin were to join forces with the Wisconsin Restaurant Association to support a uniform smoking ban, even our most lily-livered legislators would become reacquainted with their backbones.

Get on the side of clean air and healthy lives, tavern owners.

The dirty air and lung cancer image isn't working for you.