

## Statewide smoking ban smart for state

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*Wisconsin should continue its progressive stance against smoking in public places.*

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As the legislative session winds down to its mid-March close, state legislators continue to dither on one of the most significant pieces of public health legislation in years: a statewide smoking ban in almost all public places and workplaces, including bars and restaurants.

Twenty-two states have already passed statewide smoking bans, in part because they make sense both from a public health perspective and a business standpoint. It is time to save lives and pass a strong statewide smoking ban that takes effect as soon as possible.

Opponents of the statewide smoking ban have characterized this legislation as another battle between a small minority of Madison liberals and upstanding legislators fighting for individual rights for the majority of Wisconsin residents. However, in a recent statewide poll, 64 percent of respondents supported a smoke-free law for all workplaces, including restaurants and bars.

Opponents also neglect to mention that 22 states representing nearly half of the United States population have passed statewide smoking bans.

There is irrefutable evidence regarding the deleterious public health effects of second-hand smoking. According to the American Lung Association website, each year secondhand smoke causes approximately 3,400 lung cancer deaths and 46,000 heart disease deaths in adult nonsmokers in the United States.

Unfortunately, some state legislators are either unaware of this evidence or choose to ignore it. In defending his plan to stall the implementation of the statewide ban for years, "enlightened" state Sen. Roger Breske, D-Eland, dismissed the health threat posed by second-hand smoking as "hogwash." He continued his defense by stating that he had tended bar most of his life yet he had not experienced any adverse smoking-related medical conditions. This anecdote ignores decades of medical research and is downright irresponsible.

The next line of defense for people like Breske is an economic one. This one, like the public health defense, falls flat on its face.

Most studies have failed to find that smoking bans have any negative economic impact on local businesses. For instance, a 2003 review of 97 studies found that smoke-free restaurant and bar laws have "no impact or a positive impact ... on sales or employment."

The inconvenience local businesses will feel if a smoking ban is enacted is clearly outweighed by concerns for public health. The current situation in Wisconsin, with each jurisdiction establishing its own smoking-related policies, creates uncertainty for patrons looking for smoke-free establishments and gives a competitive advantage to bars in areas that have both smoke-free and smoking bars.

In the past century, Wisconsin has established its reputation as a progressive state by consistently staying ahead of the curve by passing sound government policy. The time is right for a statewide smoking ban.

Outside of the tobacco belt in the south, a national movement is under way to limit the harmful effects of secondhand smoke. Nearly two-thirds of Wisconsin residents support the ban. If state legislators fail to deliver this common sense policy this session, they must be held accountable in November.