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Editorial: Legislative leadership failing on smoking ban

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By allowing the Breathe Free Wisconsin Act to die for lack of a vote, which now appears about to happen, Wisconsin Senate Majority Russ Decker, D-Weston, and Assembly Leader Mike Huebsch, R-West Salem, are demonstrating a disappointing disregard for the people of this state.

That being said, we hope Gov. Jim Doyle and smoking ban proponents will continue to seek a way to enact this ban as soon as possible. If that means calling a special session later in the year, so be it.

The legislative calendar is running down to a matter of days, and proponents already have passed a compromise out of committee only to have it thrown back in their faces. The last scheduled day of the legislative session is March 13. Anything not passed by then likely will be on hold until at least 2009.

An Assembly committee voted 6-3 Tuesday to approve one version of the bill, but state Rep. J.A. "Doc" Hines, R-Oxford, said there's no guarantee the full Assembly will ever see it.

The opponents of the smoking ban are defending their inaction by saying they're trying to guarantee a little more time for the mom-and-pop tavern owner who might see a drop-off in business when a statewide smoking ban is implemented in taverns and restaurants.

That's hogwash, pure and simple. The legislative leadership is carrying water for the Tavern League of Wisconsin, which simply doesn't want lawmakers to vote "yes" or "no" a statewide smoking ban. A Senate committee approved a compromise that gave bars and restaurants until 2010 to abide by the ban, but Decker decided to hold out for a bill that delays the inevitable until 2011.

The "why" behind this prevent defense is rather easy to understand: Given a chance to vote on the issue, legislators from both houses and both political parties would pass the smoking ban. And within a year Wisconsin would join its neighbors implementing the smoke-free workplace.

Why would legislators vote for the smoking ban? Because that's how their constituents want them to vote. But the leaders are in charge of the schedule, and they're not scheduling a vote on either floor.

No one argues about basic standards for workplace safety. We don't want employees unprotected when working with hazardous machinery. We don't ask factory workers to breathe toxic fumes.

Why is it alright for a tavern or a restaurant to be the exception?

Let's not miss the point here. We're talking about public health and safety, not some esoteric issue of political ideology. The days of denial about the dangers of tobacco were buried long ago with the

hundreds of thousands of victims of this unhealthy addiction.

The legislative leadership is betraying the people of Wisconsin by refusing to schedule a simple up-or-down vote.