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Editorial: Force the vote

It's time for Democrats in the state Senate to stand up to their leaders, stand up for the public and get a floor vote on a statewide smoking ban.

From the Journal Sentinel

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Some observers in Madison say that Gov. Jim Doyle's proposed statewide smoking ban is dead because Senate Democratic leaders say they haven't been able to reach a compromise with supporters of the ban on exemptions for taverns. But what Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker (D-Weston) and Sen. Roger Breske (D-Eland), the caucus chair, have done and said so far looks as though they don't want a compromise at all. What they really want is to put this proposal in the grave.

It's time for others in the Senate, Democrats and Republicans, to call their bluff and force this issue to a vote. Sen. Judy Robson (D-Beloit), a strong supporter of the ban, is going to push for a vote. That would require a two-thirds vote, no easy matter.

But a statewide ban is a matter of vital public health. In 2006, U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona reported that exposure by nonsmokers to secondhand smoke increases their risk of heart disease and lung cancer by as much as 30%. Illinois and Minnesota recently enacted such bans, and polls in Wisconsin show strong public support. To his credit, Rep. Steve Wiecek (R-Appleton) is trying to get the Assembly to vote on a ban.

Breske said last week that a meeting he had with Decker, the Tavern League of Wisconsin and anti-smoking groups, including the American Cancer Society, failed to produce a compromise. Doyle wanted the ban to take effect in 2009. Breske and Decker say taverns should be exempted until July 1, 2011.

But Allison Prange, a Cancer Society lobbyist, told us the implementation date wasn't as much an obstacle for those who want the ban as other "poison pill" amendments that Breske and Decker wanted, including allowing separate smoking rooms for bars and pre-empting local ordinances from barring outside smoking patios.

Those kinds of exemptions would make Wisconsin's ban a joke, and we can't help but wonder if the senators are more interested in serving the needs and interests of taverns in their district than the public.

A check by a watchdog group of the \$294,745 in campaign donations given to legislators in both parties

by the Tavern League from 2003 through 2006 shows Breske, former president of the league, got the most - \$15,674, while Decker was No. 2 at \$10,850.

"This is a classic example of special interests trumping the will of the people," said Mike McCabe, executive director of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign.

We would certainly hope it's not that simple, but until Decker and Breske either start negotiating in good faith or, better yet, allow this matter to come to a vote, it's only natural that people will be left to wonder.

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