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Editorial

Breske emerges from cloud to fight statewide smoking ban

By Jeff Hovind

Our own State Sen. Roger Breske is going where most fear to tread. The Democrat from Eland has become the poster boy for smokers' rights in Wisconsin.

Spurred on by his long relationship with the Wisconsin Tavern League, Breske is digging in his heels in opposition of a statewide smoking ban. Largely due to his influence, the bill is stalled in the State Senate.

Breske, a former bar owner and Tavern League president, recently told reporters in Madison it's time for government to butt out.

"I think they're sticking their noses into everything," he said. "It's seat belts, it's helmets, you name it. Why does the government have to tell people what to do all the time? I just can't believe this is what we're here for. We should be doing something decent, like helping people to try to find jobs." Breske called the potential harm posed by second-hand smoking as "hogwash."

Then he got personal.

"I was born and raised in a bar since I was that high, and I was tending bar since I was that high (holding hand four feet above the ground.) And there was only one light bulb in the bar. There was no fans, and everyone smoked. It was blue in there. Come on, I'm still alive, and I'm 69 years old. It's sickening."

Well if second-hand smoke was good enough for young Roger, than it should be good enough for future generations of bartenders and waitresses. By the way, breakfast beers really don't do any harm either.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a restaurateur and barkeep. Some of the hardest-working, most fun-loving people I know are Tavern League members. I miss the social interaction and the camaraderie of the drinking public. I do not miss its smoking contingent polluting the air in my workplace.

Breske strikes a Libertarian cord when he asks government to mind its own business and let tavern owners mind theirs. Generally, that's something I can wholeheartedly agree with. But the right to breath clean air does take on a certain life-&-death significance.

We considered making our place smoke-free, but feared we would lose half our clientele. A statewide ban would at least level the playing field. Then again, there's something to be said for a

good ventilation system.

Breske claims the smoking ban would force tavern owners out of business, and he wants to delay it until 2011 so bar owners can move on. A smoking ban won't kill the bar business, tougher drunk driving enforcement is already taking care of that.

There have been drinking establishments for as long as there has been drinkers, and Wisconsin is not about to abandon its tradition of a bar for every church in town. The Tavern League can survive this. It just needs to remember that the state giveth (like video gambling) and the state may taketh away.

Some tavern owners say they'll ban smoking when the state pulls the ashtray from their cold, dead fingers. That may just be a matter of time.