

Opinion

Stop smoke in the workplace

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This is an especially appropriate time of year to think about the air we breathe, now when winter forces us indoors to inhale the dust and stale air of houses closed against the cold. A bill approved by a legislative committee last week would take a step toward cleaning our winter air by banning smoking statewide in all workplaces.

The bill, passed 3-2 on Tuesday, would halt workplace smoking in January 2009. Taverns and restaurants would have an extra year before the deadline falls on them. Groups which have advocated the ban are not keen on this bill because they want all establishments to adhere to the same deadline, nor is Gov. Jim Doyle happy, according to news reports, because he also would like a uniform starting time for a statewide ban.

This bill should still move forward because it's more important to have a ban than to not have one, and although ideally every business would have to meet the same deadline, and while different deadlines would seem to ignore the doctrine of equal protection under the law, the reality of compromise means it may not happen. What is important is that it happen.

An argument can be made against such bans in places like Racine or Kenosha where blue-collar taverns have a long history of joining tobacco to food and drink. If the issue was a contravention of habit or a matter of government forcing people to do something for their own good, the argument might work.

But the smoking ban is about protecting people who have no protection. These are restaurant and tavern workers who have to breathe smoke-filled air, and people who don't smoke and have no way to avoid it.

Workers can't leave smoky establishments unless they can find a job in a nonsmoking establishment or wish to quit and forgo income. People who don't smoke can certainly go elsewhere or stay home, yet they have no recourse if they have stopped in an establishment and are part way through a meal when someone nearby sits down and lights up. No nonsmoking section is so well isolated as to protect nonsmoking diners from all the drifting fumes.

The risks from second hand smoke are real and well documented while more than one study has shown that there is no economic harm to taverns and restaurants affected by smoking bans. Business owners have always had the power to prohibit smoking in their establishments and while some do others don't because it may limit income. They have no incentive to help protect the public health or that of their own workers.

That is where government has the responsibility to step in and where it should step in with a statewide smoking ban. People who wish to smoke still may. They will simply have to do it in a way and a place where they pose no danger to anyone else.