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## Our View: Portage County should follow Marshfield's no smoking suit

Advertisement

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The voters in Marshfield have spoken, and now it's time for not only the city of Stevens Point, but Portage County to do the same.

On April 1, residents of Marshfield passed a referendum directing their common council to enact an indoor smoking ban by a margin -- and a convincing one at that -- of 4,177-2,532.

On Tuesday, the council approved the ordinance that will be in effect as law on Sunday, making it the sixth Wisconsin community to end smoking in all public workplaces.

We need to take it a step further. The city of Marshfield may have done the work, but its surrounding areas around it have not, which will lead to disparity as patrons make their way to surrounding areas and businesses to light up.

Stevens Point has no need for those potential conflicts with its surrounding area, and that means going the extra step: A county-wide smoking ban.

While the state legislature drags its heels toward an inevitable statewide ban, Portage County can show that it's ready to do what's best for its residents today.

Don't think we're moving towards the state ban?

According to a recent study by The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, a poll of 700 Wisconsin voters found that 69 percent favored statewide smoke-free laws, which is an increase of five percent since the last poll was conducted in March 2007.

Think there was a difference among political parties? You'd be wrong, as Republicans (68 percent to 30 percent), Democrats (73 percent to 26 percent) and Independents (65 percent to 31 percent) united in their support of a measure.

Among voters polled in Wausau and north central Wisconsin, the numbers were slightly lower but still an overwhelming majority -- 63 percent for to 36 percent against.

In addition, 78 percent of respondents, including 70 percent who oppose such legislation, believe it could pass soon.

Even people who smoke seem to be looking for an out. In February, The Wisconsin Tobacco Quit Line reported calls from 20,000 residents, compared to 9,000 total for a typical year.

Will there be people unhappy with this measure and look to provide opposition to it? Sure.

Are there going to be businesses who will bemoan the fact that their businesses will dry up if they don't allow their patrons the opportunity to smoke, and will take out advertisements telling us how their livelihood is being threatened? Probably.

But the fact is that public sentiment is moving us, perhaps kicking and screaming for some, to becoming smoke-free.

As a business, the Stevens Point Journal isn't a casual observer to this issue, we're being proactive about the dangers of smoking to employees.

In April 2007, Central Wisconsin Media -- which includes the papers in Stevens Point, Marshfield, Wausau and Wisconsin Rapids -- enacted a Tobacco-Free Policy for our facilities.

The policy prohibits use of tobacco products on property maintained by Gannett. This includes sidewalks, parking lots -- and in your car in the parking lot -- and company vehicles. Violations of the policy can result in punishments up to termination. We also have a cessation program for those who wish to quit.

Still, with all this information, the county leadership hasn't taken a proactive stance on this issue.

In July 2007, The Portage County Board declined to support a statewide workplace smoking ban despite results of a survey conducted by Faye Tetzloff, the county's health officer, which indicated that two-thirds of 398 Portage County residents polled were in favor of a ban.

Now, as a neighbor has taken a step in the right direction, it's time for them to do just that.