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Dire need for state smoking ban You can 't blame city leaders in communities such as Fitchburg, Eau Claire and Marshfield for doing the right thing.

A Wisconsin State Journal editorial
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In the absence of a smart state law banning smoking inside restaurants and bars, more local communities are adopting local bans.

You can 't blame city leaders in communities such as Fitchburg, Eau Claire and Marshfield for doing the right thing. Yet a statewide ban is still badly needed to prevent a patchwork of regulation from unfairly harming small businesses on the border between communities with different rules.

Fitchburg banned smoking in most of its bars and restaurants Tuesday. The city had generously given its eating and drinking establishments time to create or improve outdoor seating for smokers. It also is exempting two bars and a bowling alley until 2011.

Eventually, though, every place except a cigar bar will ban smoking inside. That 's similar to Madison 's law.

The Eau Claire City Council voted to prohibit smoking in bars come July. And in Marshfield, voters Tuesday overwhelmingly passed a ban on indoor smoking in public places.

Many other communities are now considering local bans, including Middleton. Ald. Jim Wexler last week cited the state 's failure to act as the key reason for talk of expanding Middleton 's ban on smoking. The city already prohibits smoking inside restaurants. Wexler said a majority of the council wants to extend the ban to bars.

"People realize that even though it 's not their ideal choice by doing it community-by-community, that 's the only way this will be achieved, " Wexler said.

Gov. Jim Doyle has wisely made a statewide smoking ban a priority. A statewide ban would create a level playing field for all establishments. This would prevent the potential negative and unfair financial impact on bars that must compete with neighboring bars located across municipal

borders in communities that still allow indoor smoking.

Unfortunately, Democrats who control the Senate and Republicans who run the Assembly refused to send a bill to Doyle 's desk before the Legislature finished his regular business for the year.

That 's why more local communities are expected to approve local bans, creating an even wider and unpredictable maze of regulation across the state.

Wisconsin needs to follow the examples of neighboring Minnesota and Illinois, both of which have banned smoking in bars and restaurants.

Madison has shown that a ban on smoking inside bars isn 't a big deal for smokers, who have accepted the easy courtesy of stepping outside when they want to light up. Many Madison bars also cater to smokers by providing outside patios -- some with heaters in winter -- where smoking is still allowed.

More importantly, non-smoking patrons and especially bar employees inside can enjoy clean air and better health.

If the Legislature needs even more evidence that a statewide ban is overdue, a study last week helps make the case. Researchers including Scott Adams at UW-Milwaukee discovered higher numbers of fatal vehicle accidents involving alcohol in areas with local smoking bans.

Adams suspects people in these areas are driving farther to drink, either to a bar with an outdoor smoking area or to a community without a ban.

A statewide ban would stop this by creating uniform regulation. And smokers would still enjoy the freedom to smoke in comfy areas outside.

Voters should ask their legislative candidates this fall if they favor a statewide smoking ban. The Legislature needs more advocates willing to finally get this important legislation on the books.

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