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## Illinois should join effort to ban secondhand smoke

January 25, 2007

More than half of all Illinoisans are protected from secondhand smoke in public places, thanks to the patchwork of smoking bans that have been passed in places such as Chicago, several suburbs and a handful of Downstate communities. That represents a significant change from as recently as five years ago, but it's still not good enough. Given the ever-growing evidence about the dangers of smoking and secondhand smoke, we support legislation to enact a statewide ban.

The risks of smoking are well-known, or should be. A version of the U.S. surgeon general's warning is printed on every cigarette pack: Smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease, emphysema and may complicate pregnancy. And the surgeon general's report last summer should have ended the debate about the health risks of secondhand smoke: It causes 46,000 deaths a year from heart disease, 3,000 from cancer and 430 from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Put simply, there is no safe level of exposure to it.

Opponents of bans argue that business owners should be free to decide for themselves whether to allow smoking, especially if they are running a bar or restaurant. We have been sympathetic to that argument. But we can no longer ignore the risks their workers face in being exposed to smoking. We impose all sorts of rules on businesses, including bars and restaurants, to maintain a healthy and safe environment. It's not a stretch to ban smoking, too -- indeed, it's shocking that we still allow it, given the lives and the health costs we'd save with a ban.

The other, tired argument is that they'll lose customers to businesses where smoking is still allowed. But countless studies have proved that businesses do not suffer economically from bans. In fact, they've helped business -- which is not too surprising, given that most people are nonsmokers. Even if one suburb were losing business to another because of a ban, a statewide law would level the playing field.

Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago) has introduced an Illinois ban that would start next year. It's a good bill, although we think it should include a provision similar to the one in Chicago's ordinance, which permits smoking in tobacco shops where 65 percent of the sales are of tobacco or tobacco accessories. Cullerton fears that may create a loophole, but a similar provision in New York City has not led to abuse.

If tobacco companies were trying to introduce cigarettes as a new product in 2007, they would never be allowed. They're simply too dangerous. Several countries, 21 states and 570 cities have recognized this, repealing smokers' mythical right to pollute our air in workplaces and/or bars and/or restaurants. It's time for Illinois to join them.

*This represents the view of Sun-Times News Group newspapers in metropolitan Chicago.*