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Illinois, smoke-free

January 18, 2007

Over the last couple of years, many cities in Illinois—including Chicago—have banned smoking in most public places to the great relief of workers, non-smokers and, as it turns out, even some of the smokers themselves.

The arguments for and against a ban are familiar. For us, public health concerns carry the day.

Last year, Surgeon General Richard Carmona underscored the power of the argument. Based on 20 years of scientific evidence, he reported, there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke. "The debate is over as far as I'm concerned," Carmona said. "Based on the science, I wouldn't allow anyone in my family to stand in a room with someone smoking."

All told, about half the state's population is covered under local laws, according to estimates compiled by the Illinois Coalition Against Tobacco. That still leaves millions in the state at unnecessary risk.

Last week, state lawmakers introduced legislation that would clear the air in Illinois by prohibiting smoking in all public places—including offices, taverns, restaurants and stores. The only exceptions would be private residences used as businesses that are not open to customers, retail tobacco stores in operation before the bill is passed, private nursing-home rooms and some hotel rooms.

A smoking ban was an excellent move for Chicago. It was a great idea for towns like Evanston and Normal and Rolling Meadows and Park Ridge and Highland Park and Wilmette and Hinsdale and Hawthorn Woods and Burr Ridge and Buffalo Grove and Bedford Park and Arlington Heights. So why not the entire state?

When the Chicago ban passed, bar owners on city boundaries worried that smokers would simply take their business across city lines. Then Cook County passed a ban, effective March 15, 2007. "We need to level the playing field for all workplaces and provide the same health privileges to workers and patrons throughout Illinois," said Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago). "Many municipalities are waiting eagerly on the sidelines for the state to act on this matter, and it's about time we do that." We're sold.

There's another important benefit to passing this law. The ban would be effective on Jan. 1, 2008. That would shorten the excessively long grace period granted to Chicago restaurants with bars and freestanding taverns. As it stands now, they don't have to clear the air until July of 2008--2 1/2 years after the City Council banned smoking in Chicago.

The City Council isn't likely to revisit this issue, especially after the agonizing negotiations that preceded the last deal. The state law would roll back the grace period without further council action.

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The momentum for smoking bans is worldwide and growing stronger. There are 16 states with smoke-free laws similar to the one proposed in this state, according to the American Cancer Society.

A smoke-free Illinois in 2008. Wouldn't that be beautiful?

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