



Need for state smoking law clearer than ever

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For years, we occasionally employed this space to say that any smoking ban in Illinois should be done in the form of statewide restrictions. A mixture of varying local ordinances, we argued, would confuse customers and employees and put business owners in some suburbs at an economic disadvantage.

Then, last spring, the General Assembly and Gov. Rod Blagojevich gave counties and municipalities the authority to adopt their own smoking regulations. With that, we modified our long-standing view, acknowledging that local ordinances would at least be beneficial in protecting restaurant workers' health. But we urged neighboring municipalities inclined to restrict smoking to work together to create, in effect, regional ordinances.

Now, after six months of watching counties and municipalities adopt and reject a hodgepodge of ordinances, we conclude that we were correct all along: The only way to make a smoking ban truly fair and effective is to do it statewide — an effort that several groups, including the American Lung Association, are about to launch in Springfield as the new legislative session opens.

State lawmakers should act because what county and municipal officials have come up with is a mess; well-intended, but a mess just the same. For instance:

Mount Prospect, heeding business owners' concerns, will still permit smoking lounges in drinking establishments. That sensitivity to business concerns may be well-placed, but the village nonetheless has been excoriated by critics for what they consider to be a weak ordinance.

In fact, Mount Prospect's rules are less restrictive than those in next-door Arlington Heights, where anyone smoking within 15 feet of a public place is now in trouble — unless that public place happens to be Arlington Park racetrack, where smoking is permitted.

Then there's Roselle, whose village trustees gave an adamant "no" to Village President Gayle Smolinski's request for a smoking ban, but now are weighing a plea from a business owner in the village's small Cook County portion that they pass an ordinance specifically permitting smoking; otherwise, that business will have to live with a Cook County ban effective in March.

Consider the case of Vernon Hills, where trustees gave the owner of a pool hall a temporary respite from posting "no smoking" signs because the owner argued that his business consisted mostly of tobacco sales — which turned out to be true only if catalog sales were taken into account.

What we have shaping up here is precisely the kind of uneven playing field that has so worried business owners and made local bans problematic all along. Those who object to a statewide ban either oppose all bans as a matter of principle or say the state should not strip local control so soon after granting it. To the former objection, the case for employees' health

remains valid. To the latter objection, this is one case where the state can — and should — change course.

Local control often is best, and, for that matter, local smoking restrictions still are better than nothing. But health and economic factors in this situation argue powerfully for a uniform statewide law.

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