

Published: January 22, 2007

Editorial

## State could be next entity to pass smoking ban

It was just two years ago that Senate President Emil Jones banned smoking in the Senate chambers. That was decades after most businesses protected their employees by providing a smoke-free environment.

So, Illinois is a little slow. There's a chance to redeem ourselves.

State Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago, has introduced a bill in the General Assembly that would ban smoking in all public places in Illinois. It's a matter of fairness on a number of levels.

Sixteen states have already passed such legislation, Cullerton said. More than 40 communities throughout Illinois have passed their own smoking bans.

We applaud these communities for their stance. But we believe bar and restaurant owners have a point when they say local bans put them at a disadvantage. A customer may need only get in his or her car and travel a few blocks to an establishment that allows smoking.

A smoking ban took effect in Oak Forest, Tinley Park and Orland Park on Jan. 2. Already, bar owners say they are hurting and expect to lose business during Sunday's Bears vs. Saints game. Those communities considered a temporary delay in enforcing the ban.

The cigarettes were barely snuffed out when communities were ready to wave the white flag of surrender. That's too bad.

It's mostly bad for employees. Employees who are exposed to secondhand smoke daily are 25 percent to 30 percent more likely to develop cancer than other workers. According to the University of California at Berkeley School of Public Health, one eight-hour shift in a smoky workplace is the equivalent of smoking 16 cigarettes.

"Restaurant, bar and hospitality workers are exposed to the highest levels of secondhand smoke of any occupational or demographic group and they should not have to risk their health for a paycheck," Cullerton said in a press release distributed by PRNewswire.

The frequent argument is, "Well, they chose to work there." Workplace health and safety shouldn't be voluntary. Employers should minimize all the risks they can.

Is asking customers to refrain from lighting up too much to ask to protect people just punching a clock? Risking workers' health to accommodate someone else's bad habits hardly seems like a fair trade-off.

Besides, it's only a matter of time. In addition to the 16 states with smoking bans (including Massachusetts, California and New York), Chicago banned smoking in most buildings last year. The impetus was the surgeon general's report, released in June 2006, that cataloged the harm caused by secondhand smoke. Of the deaths attributed to secondhand smoke were 46,000 people from heart disease, 3,000 from lung cancer and 430 from sudden infant death syndrome.

In Illinois alone, eight people a day die from exposure to secondhand smoke. That's from a 2002 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC has been consistent over the past two decades in its message that nonsmokers suffer the diseases of active smokers when they breathe smoke.

Children are especially at risk. They suffer respiratory problems including asthma attacks. They get middle-ear infections. They die from sudden infant death syndrome.

Despite this research, some people cling — no, they gasp and claw — to the notion that they have a sovereign right to end their meal or enjoy their Miller with a smoke. They don't, not when their neighbor is breathing the 4,000 toxins in that cig, too.

Sen. Cullerton's bill gives Illinois the opportunity to protect public health and pass a smoking ban that applies to every public place and workplace from Crystal Lake to Cairo. As the surgeon general said this summer, "The debate is over."

Lawmakers shouldn't waste their breath on foregone conclusions. They should just pass the ban.