

Our Opinion

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Illinois should be smoke-free

YEAR AFTER YEAR, Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago, introduced a bill that would have required motorcycle riders to wear helmets. Thanks to the power of the state's motorcycle-rider lobby, that bill never became law. We have a much better feeling about the chances of Cullerton's Senate Bill 500 - Smoke Free Illinois - which he introduced this past week.

It too will be controversial. And powerful lobbying forces will oppose it. But a large majority of Illinois residents favor the sanctions on public smoking contained in SB 500.

Springfield, Sangamon County, Chicago and dozens of other local governments in Illinois have enacted comprehensive smoking bans since given the power to do so a year ago. In fact, close to half of the state's population will soon come under such bans.

It is now time for all of Illinois' indoor workplaces to become smoke-free.

ONE OF THE biggest complaints we have heard since Springfield's smoking ban went into effect Sept. 17 is that bars within the city are at an unfair advantage because nearby bars in other municipalities can still allow indoor smoking. SB 500 would do away with that.

Yet, the bill would not catapult Illinois into uncharted smoking-ban territory. Hundreds of municipalities across the country and 16 states already have comprehensive workplace smoking restrictions. Entire countries - countries very dependent on tourism and the hospitality industry - such as Ireland and Italy have adopted smoke-free policies.

Cullerton's proposal, which would include nearly every indoor workplace, including bars and restaurants, already has broad, bipartisan support. More than 400 organizations have signed on as supporters.

"I firmly believe smoke-free public places are inevitable," said Sen. Christine Radogno, R-Lemont, who said polls in her district showed 66 percent approve of a smoking ban. "The only question is, is Illinois going to be a leader, or are we going to be one of the last to have it in place?"

We are proud Springfield has been a leader in Illinois on this vital public health issue, and we believe Illinois most certainly should be among the leaders in the nation.

TWO MAIN obstacles stand in the way. One, despite devastating evidence to the contrary from the U.S. surgeon general's report, some still do not believe secondhand smoke is a

public health problem. They could not be more wrong. An estimated 2,900 people die in Illinois annually due to exposure to secondhand smoke - that's eight people each day.

Many critics won't believe those numbers. They should talk to Lisa Cristia, who during her 20s worked in smoky bar settings in suburban Chicago for several years. In her early 30s, Cristia, who has never smoked a cigarette, was diagnosed with stage 3 throat and tongue cancer, or "smoker's cancer" as her doctor described it. She is a survivor, but she had to relearn how to breathe, speak and swallow after losing half of her tongue, having a tracheotomy and having 23 lymph nodes removed.

"I am a victim of secondhand smoke," said Cristia at a news conference announcing Cullerton's bill. "I'm here because I don't want others to go through the pain I've gone through."

SECONDLY, others will argue that a smoke-free law will hurt business. Cullerton says making the policy statewide would actually have the opposite effect by leveling the playing field. He stresses that data from around the country indicate the bans do not have a negative effect on business.

"Things happen, things progress," said Michael Higgins, owner of Springfield's Maldaner's Restaurant, who says his business has increased since he went smoke-free at the beginning of 2006. "This is progressing, and people should realize it; Illinois will be smoke-free."