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## **Smoking ban would offer a breath of fresh air**

As the lead story in today's newspaper indicates, the push for smoke-free environment is gaining momentum throughout the country and in Southern Illinois. The time now seems right for governmental bodies in the region to ban smoking in public places, including restaurants and bars.

Why now? Not just because a group of concerned citizens are pushing for change, but because we know more today than ever before about the health risks involving secondhand smoke. This new information alone is enough scare one to death.

According to new statistics released by Smoke Free Illinois, secondhand smoke kills about 65,000 Americans annually and is the third-leading cause of preventable death in America. It contains more than 4,000 chemicals and more than 69 carcinogens, which help cause cancer, stroke, heart disease, sudden infant death syndrome, respiratory ailments and even inner ear infections in children.

Moreover, restaurant workers, for example, are exposed to more secondhand smoke than other workers, eventually taking a toll on their health. People who are exposed to secondhand smoke have 25 to 35 percent higher coronary death rates. Nonsmoking workers in a smoking facility have a 16-19 percent increased risk of developing lung cancer.

Still not convinced? How about the economic ramifications? Won't local businesses see a dropoff in customers if they are required to go smoke-free?

Surprisingly, no.

Smoke Free Illinois studies indicate that smoking bans do not negatively impact businesses - at least not in California or Colorado, where similar bans have already been put into place. In fact, many businesses have shown positive gains.

Clean indoor air ordinances have also proven to reduce medical costs and lost work time due to secondhand smoke-related illnesses.

Bar owners might also be surprised to know that a study done in California in 2000 found that 75 percent of bar patrons rated a smoke-free environment as "important" or "very

important" and that 91 percent of bar patrons have not changed their attendance habits once smoking bans were enacted.

So why not give smoke-free a try in Southern Illinois? It's our bet that local business owners will see more benefits than they would have ever imagined. Those residents who have often stayed away from businesses where smoking is permitted may return in droves once smoking is banned. We should all have the right to inhale clean air in public places.

Smokers may have the right to light up and inhale, but do not have the right to invade others' air space.

