

Smoking ban shifts to state

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Since the beginning of the year, we've been witness to a fascinating exercise in local democracy. And it all had to do with smoking.

As a ban on smoking in suburban Cook County drew near, virtually every Southland community was forced to act on local ordinances spelling out whether lighting up should be allowed in public places. More specifically, debate centered around whether smoking should be allowed in restaurants and bars.

The county's smoking ban went into effect Thursday. And, with a couple of notable exceptions, smoking will be allowed to go on as before in bars and restaurants in incorporated cities and villages. Smoking is now illegal at such establishments in unincorporated areas.

In nearly all south suburban communities, restaurant and bar owners must decide if their establishments will be smoke-free. We can only assume restaurant and bar owners who spoke out strongly against the ban will allow smoking.

Those bar and restaurant owners, in towns all across the South Suburbs, argued they would lose business with a smoking ban and would soon be forced to close. In Oak Forest, Tinley Park and Orland Park -- where bans started Jan. 2 -- business owners told local municipal officials their customer base fled as soon as the anti-smoking rules went into effect. They reported big losses, in some cases as high as 50 percent.

When those three communities passed their smoking bans last fall, it was with the understanding that other towns would follow suit. When that didn't happen, the three towns found themselves out on a very narrow ledge and took steps to halt the ban until mid-March. Oak Forest eventually rescinded the ban for bars and restaurants. Tinley Park postponed its ban until June 1; after that, bars and restaurants can apply for exemptions. As of last week, Orland Park was the only Southland town with a full smoking ban in effect.

We're not going to second-guess actions by most of our elected municipal officials. By approving regulations less restrictive than the county ordinance, they obviously believed they were helping local businesses.

The Star, however, believes steps are needed to eliminate deadly chemicals from the air in public places once and for all. We believe a statewide ban is needed and support legislation to prohibit smoking in public.

If we've learned anything in the last 10 weeks, it's that local officials probably should not be called upon to ban smoking when lighting up is still permitted in bars and restaurants a short distance away. It's obvious that without a statewide ban, we'll continue to see neighboring towns or counties pitted against one another on this important public health issue.

As the county's ban goes into effect, patrons and workers at most south suburban restaurants are inhaling the same second-hand smoke they were breathing before the start of the year. To some, this is an issue that is all about personal choice. We think it's about protecting people from airborne substances that can literally kill them.

A state ban would be fair. It would level the field for one and all. It makes perfect sense.