

New smoking squeeze

Proposed statewide ban would leave no bar or bowling alley exempt

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SPRINGFIELD -- While a patchwork of cities and suburbs has already banned smoking in public places, state lawmakers Thursday introduced legislation that would prohibit smoking in all public spots in Illinois--from taverns and restaurants to stores and bowling alleys.

The time has come for Illinois to join more than a dozen other states with broad smoking bans, said Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago), the bill's sponsor.

Medical studies show secondhand smoke is dangerous to patrons and employees, especially those working in bars and restaurants, he said.

"We need to level the playing field for all workplaces and provide the same health privileges to workers and patrons throughout Illinois. Many municipalities are waiting eagerly on the sidelines for the state to act on this matter, and it's about time we do that," Cullerton said.

Legislative leaders and the governor reacted cautiously to the measure, one of the first bills to be introduced in the newly minted General Assembly.

"We'll look and see what's happening," said Senate President Emil Jones (D-Chicago). "I don't make off-the-cuff decisions on critical issues like that."

Jones made headlines two years ago when he banned smoking in the Senate chambers, years after the House had gone smoke free. But Jones said he wanted to discuss current legislation with proponents.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich and House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago) wanted to review the legislation before commenting, aides said.

Sixteen states, including California, Massachusetts and New York, have passed similar

statewide measures, Cullerton said.

The ban would require that all indoor public places, including places of employment, be smoke free. The only exceptions would be private residences used as businesses that are not open to customers, retail tobacco stores in operation before the bill is passed, private nursing-home rooms and some hotel rooms.

If approved, the legislation would take effect on Jan. 1, 2008, and would supersede the recently passed Chicago ordinance that gives city bars until July 2008 to implement a ban, Cullerton said.

The Chicago ordinance provides an exception for taverns that install ventilation systems; there is no such provision in Cullerton's statewide proposal.

Anti-smoking advocates joined Cullerton and other legislators supporting the bill, including Sen. Christine Radogno (R-Lemont).

"This will level the playing field so, if one town adopts a smoke-free ordinance, they're not disadvantaged by the town next to them that doesn't have it," she said. "That argument will be gone."

But the head of a group that lobbies for bars and taverns said anti-smoking groups deliberately created the need to "level the playing field" when they won the right to let local governments ban smoking.

"They push ... for municipalities to ban smoking, then push the issue that it's not fair to the guy next door," said Steve Riedl, executive director of the Illinois Licensed Beverage Association. "Two wrongs don't make a right."

A statewide ban would give little help to businesses foundering under local bans, he said. It would result in a 32 percent loss of revenue, based on the experiences of bars, fraternal organizations and bowling alleys where bans are in place, he said.

"The death is delayed," he said. "They will keep the doors open just a couple more months."

Sen. Bill Brady (R-Bloomington) said he understands the public health issue created by smoking, but private property owners should be able to decide whether they will allow smoking or not.

"I will not support a bill that would abolish private property owner's rights," Brady said. "Every Illinoisan has a right to not step into these places if they don't want to. Frankly, the free market will solve this."

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A broader ban

If passed, the state anti-smoking law would supersede Chicago's ordinance that gives bars until July 2008 to implement the ban. Chicago's ordinance also allows smoking to continue in taverns that have installed ventilation systems. No such provision is in the statewide proposal.

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