

Discussing smoking regulations is not as dramatic or drastic as some may think it to be and this issue certainly is important to all. And up until last month, municipalities such as Woodridge couldn't regulate smoking because of a quirk in the Illinois Clean Indoor Air Act. Now that the legislature has fixed that quirk, we can now regulate smoking and is simply a matter of protecting public health and safety that is fairly straightforward.

For example, let's say the Village took air samples in a building of a company in International Center that makes widgets. And the readings came back showing 4,000 chemicals, 200 poisons, and 69 cancer-causing agents. What would we do? That's easy – we would shut the building down and not let any of the employees or customers return until it was made safe. And no one would blink an eye at that because it was clearly done in the name of public health and safety.

We would not permit that company to allow that poisonous air in just one section of the building, where only a few of the employees or customers were, while the rest of the building was supposedly safe. Nor would we permit the company to allow that poisonous air during the late shift, when only a few employees or customers were exposed to it. Because all employees and customers deserve to breathe clean, safe air regardless of where they work, or when they work.

The widget company may offer to install a ventilation system that purported to clean the air. But ventilation systems only remove the smell from the air, it does nothing to remove the cancer-causing agents from the air. It is a poisonous atmosphere that smells better. Not good enough when it comes to protecting the health and safety of the company employees and customers.

And it wouldn't matter that the widget company complained that it would lose money if it couldn't make it's widgets while the building was shut down because of the poisonous air, or that customers would go someone else for their widgets while the building was shut down; or that (the Village) wouldn't receive our sales tax revenue from the widget not being sold while the building was shut down. Because protecting the health of the company employees and the public is more important than company profits or municipal tax revenue.

Now, if you tested the air in any restaurant, bar, or bowling alley that allows smoking, you would find 4,000 chemicals, 200 poisons, and 69 cancer-causing agents, just like our hypothetical widget-maker. And restaurants, bars, and bowling alleys are no different than the widget maker. No-smoking sections do not make the restaurant or bar safe, nor does allowing smoking after a certain time of night. Ventilation systems only remove the smell from the air, not the poisons. They should not be permitted to decide whether they have to provide clean air or not.

The Director of the American Lung Association was quoted: "Everyone deserves a clean safe workplace. The expectation to breathe clean air at work is no different than expecting to eat and drink clean safe food and water. No one should have to be exposed at work to something that has been proven to increase the risk of heart attacks, stroke, lung cancer, asthma and many other diseases. This is a basic public health issue."

A quote from a lawmaker: "Opponents of a smoking ban generally oppose a ban by saying smoking is a legal activity, and laws shouldn't be passed on things that are legal or that individuals have a choice and can choose to not patronize establishments that allow smoking.

But governments regulate and pass laws related to legal activities all the time. There are many laws relating to smoking (you must be 18 to buy cigarettes, for example), operating a restaurant (health codes, licenses and the like) and driving (speed limits, no parking, etc). Yes, individuals can choose to patronize establishments that don't allow smoking, but workers have a much more limited choice. Restaurants and bars provide many job opportunities for our young people. They should not have to sacrifice their health to earn money to pay for their education. We, as a society, have an obligation to recognize that life is about more than dollars and cents. We must take action, when necessary, to protect the health of our residents."

A quote from a lawmaker: "It's no longer smokers' rights versus nonsmokers' rights. It's a health issue. You can debate all you want about your rights, but you don't have the right to cause harm to someone."

Now here's the good news. Studies have shown that business in restaurants, bars and bowling alleys remove the same or actual go up after going smoke-free. I received an email from Highland Park Mayor Mike Belsky and he said that since their smoke-free ordinance was enacted several months ago, revenues are the same or slightly higher due to non-smokers going back to restaurants and bars.

I spoke with Highland Park Trustee Mike Brenner and he echoed the Mayor's comments about revenues. He gave a specific example that the bar revenues at a major restaurant increased 20% because people were getting a drink from the bar while waiting for their table, something that they wouldn't have done had the bar not been smoke-free.

I received an email from Wilmette Trustee James Griffin who said that three of their restaurants protested going smoke free but all are still in business and three new restaurants have come to Wilmette since the smoke-free ordinance in July 2004.

However, there are two restaurants who have been adversely affected by a smoking ban. One restaurant in Wilmette had late-night jazz and they have seen that crowd get smaller. We don't have any late-night jazz clubs in Woodridge so that doesn't apply to us. Also, the restaurant in Skokie called "Jack's" used to be open 24 hours by they now close at 11:00 pm because they could not sustain an overnight shift because of the lack of smokers.

The eyes of DuPage County are upon us. I sent an email to every elected municipal official in DuPage – around 150 of them – and they will be watching to see what we do here in Woodridge.

All residents of Woodridge, visitors to Woodridge and employees in Woodridge deserve to breathe clean, safe air while they are in Woodridge. It is not up to businesses to decide whether they need to provide it or not. Clean, safe air is not optional. And we have a duty and responsibility protect public health."

Robert Brandt – statement at September 1, 2005 Woodridge Village Board Workshop