

Smoke-free by 2008

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Not so long ago, a statewide ban on smoking in public places seemed about as likely as snow in July. Amazingly, however, Illinois now appears to be on the brink of just such a law.

The Senate approved the measure last month, surprising even longtime advocates with the lopsidedness of the 34-23 vote. The House takes it up soon, and its chances there seem good. Gov. Rod Blagojevich hasn't said if he'll sign such a law, but it's hard to imagine he wouldn't, given his campaign to improve health-care coverage in the state.

The view here: Let's get this done.

The new law would clear the air in Illinois by prohibiting smoking in all public places -- including offices, taverns, restaurants and stores. 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. It would take effect Jan. 1.

Chicago has a strong smoke-free law, taking full effect next year. Cook County's is already clamped on. Many suburbs have stubbed out cigarettes and more are considering it.

Still, some local leaders worry about the impact of such laws on local businesses. A couple of Chicago suburban towns temporarily suspended bans in recent months. Others have either passed watered-down restrictions or ducked the issue, fearful that local restaurants will lose business to a smoking-allowed establishment across a local border.

That's why a statewide smoke-free law is so appealing: There's no difference across city or county borders, so business owners need not fret. This proposal, similar to laws in 18 states, is driven by studies that show, as the U.S. surgeon general said, there is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke.

Those who argue that local towns should be able to decide for themselves on smoking bans ignore a basic reality: About half the state's population is already covered under anti-smoking laws, according to estimates compiled by the Illinois Coalition Against Tobacco. That leaves the other half of the state unprotected, which means millions of Illinoisans at unnecessary risk.

Many Chicago restaurant and bar owners understand this. They're not waiting for Chicago's law to fully kick in. They've already banned smoking. Amazingly, that's true even for some of the smokiest venues in the city -- jazz clubs. The Velvet Lounge on East Cermak Road, for instance, has gone smoke-free. The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, from both customers and musicians, reports the Tribune's Howard Reich. As we would expect.

The momentum to quash smoking in public places is building fast. Since the debate about a statewide law began in earnest in Illinois earlier this year, two more states -- New Mexico and Maryland -- have passed similar anti-smoking laws. Several others -- including Minnesota and Wisconsin -- are moving in that direction. There's no reason for Illinois to delay.