

# Going smoke-free at last

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Not too long ago, Chicago and the rest of the state seemed stuck in a continuous loop of bickering on the subject of a restaurant smoking ban. The restaurant association vehemently opposed a ban, as did some restaurateurs who feared the loss of smoking customers would doom their businesses. The American Cancer Society, the American Lung Association, the American Heart Association and other advocates fought just as hard to illuminate the public health risks of secondhand smoke in public places, including bars and restaurants.

Both sides wielded powerful arguments. Both were dug in.

No longer. On Tuesday, the Illinois House joined the Senate in approving a statewide smoking ban in most public places. As in the earlier Senate vote, this one was shockingly lopsided, 73-42, signaling the dramatic momentum shift on this issue since Chicago passed its smoke-free law in December 2005.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich says he most likely will sign it. He should.

This law would be a triumph not only for public health, but for fairness. The new law would eliminate a confusing patchwork of local laws that some restaurant owners complained had hurt business. Starting Jan. 1, smokers who want to light up in most public places, including restaurants with bars and taverns, will have to take it outside. In a measure of how long and fierce this battle has been, cheers erupted in the House chambers after the vote. Rep. Karen Yarbrough (D-Maywood), the bill's sponsor, embraced colleagues and slapped high-fives.

We'll join in the cheering. This is a great moment for the health of the people of Illinois. Most of all, it's a great moment for all those who work in bars and other places where secondhand smoke hangs in the air. The vote underscores a basic scientific tenet, as the U.S. surgeon general has asserted: There is no safe level of exposure to secondhand smoke.

The smoking ban didn't come quickly or easily. It took years of political skirmishes in towns like Skokie, Wilmette, Arlington Heights and Orland Park, where local officials stood up for public health at risk to their political careers and their communities' tax coffers. It took years in which advocates marshaled medical studies and lobbied legislators and other opinion-makers. It took a cultural change on smoking that is evident not only in America but in many foreign countries.

Illinois now becomes the 19th state to pass a sweeping smoking ban. It will not be the last.

It's our guess that years from now people won't understand all the fuss. Just as it would seem strange to Americans now if people lit up in an airplane, or at the office -- as they once did -- it will seem strange to future generations that a ban on indoor smoking would kindle such fierce arguments. But it did. And, thankfully, for Illinois that argument is now just about over.