



Maintain uniformity in smoking ban

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With a new year will come many new state laws.

One in particular will have a dramatic impact on the quality of life in Illinois.

The Smoke-Free Illinois Act, to take effect on Jan. 1, bans smoking in all public places, including bars, restaurants, public buildings and work places.

For smokers, it will mean that many fewer places to light up. Surely an incentive to quit.

For those who don't smoke, it will mean relief from exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke, which the U.S. Surgeon General has concluded is more than a "mere annoyance" but a "serious health hazard" that puts passive inhalers at risk of illness and death.

This law is an important advancement in protecting public health. It is a particularly welcome development for employees in restaurants and bars who do not use tobacco but must work in a cloud of harmful smoke for hours and days at a time.

The comprehensive statewide smoking ban also builds broad uniformity into protecting public health that would not be possible with a patchwork of local laws forbidding smoking in public places. Some businesses have pointed out the unfairness of a piecemeal approach to banning smoking that would have them losing customers to neighboring communities that permit smoking in bars and restaurants. Just such an argument in part led Naperville to reject a local smoking ban in favor of the statewide ban that aims to put all communities and businesses on the same footing.

Yet the law does not forbid home-rule communities from toughening the statewide ban. Indeed, Highland Park has approved a new local law which one-ups the state with restricted smoking in many outdoor settings, including city-owned parking lots, Metra commuter rail platforms, golf driving ranges, beaches, public parks and outdoor festivals. The city's law also prohibits smoking within 25 feet of a public entrance, compared to the state law's 10 feet; limits hotels and motels to designating 10 percent of rooms for smokers, compared to the state's 25 percent; and bans smoking in public areas of condo, apartment, dorm or other residential buildings, which is not addressed in the Illinois law.

We can understand Highland Park, or any other community, wanting to do more to protect the public from harmful smoke. But this once again could lead to a patchwork of laws against smoking varying from community to community.

We would urge municipalities that are inclined to enact new local anti-smoking laws that go beyond what state law authorizes to do so in a spirit of regional cooperation. It is preferable for municipalities to work collectively on any enhancements of the statewide smoking ban rather than create tiers of new laws in acting separately. Again, such a strategy would protect public health while putting all communities, and businesses within them, on equal footing.