

## EDITORIAL: Smoking ban

The Issue: Legislature may get bill next session. Our View: Make time for serious consideration.

As Vanderburgh County prepares to debate whether to allow smoking to continue in bars and restaurants, news comes that the state of Indiana may have a smoking debate of its own in the offing.

According to The Associated Press, Democratic Rep. Charlie Brown of Gary is planning to champion a bill in the upcoming legislative session that would ban smoking in public places, including bars and restaurants.

Of course, as just about anyone who smokes or who regularly visits bars and restaurants in Vanderburgh County knows, a decision awaits on whether the county will allow smoking to continue in bars and restaurants come 2009.

Two years ago, the County Commissioners passed an ordinance banning smoking in public places outside the city limits. That ordinance exempted bars and restaurants, but the exemption will expire Jan. 2.

The city has a similar ordinance with an exemption for bars and restaurants, but that exemption has no expiration date. Smoking will be permitted at bars and restaurants in the city, and the expiration of the county exemption is in doubt. Democrats take control of the commission in January, and they have talked of amending the ordinance to allow smoking to continue. The commissioners say they will invite public comment before making a decision on bars and restaurants.

But in the meantime, the state may take up the same issue.

Brown, chairman of the House Public Health Committee, said in the AP report that he sees it as a public health issue, with his primary aim being to protect the health of nonsmokers who work in places where smoking is allowed.

The AP report said the sides are lining up this way:

Those supporting Brown's proposal are the Indiana Campaign for Smokefree Air, the American Heart Association, the American Lung Association and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Those against the legislation include the Indiana Licensed Beverage Association, which represents bars and restaurants, and the Casino Association of Indiana.

This is a fight that could have taken place in the legislative session earlier this year — Brown filed a similar bill then — but it received scant attention, understandably, because that short session devoted most of its attention to property tax relief.

The upcoming session threatens to be a tough one as well. It is a budget year, and we all know what is happening to the economy. But because it is a long session, lawmakers should be able to find the time to talk about an issue that finds other states leaving Indiana behind.

According to the AP, 29 states, in addition to Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C., have smoke-free laws, and four other states have passed laws that will take effect in 2009. And in Indiana, 36 counties or communities have smoke-free ordinances of different types. Brown believes passage of his bill would bring uniformity to local measures, which would be true in Evansville and Vanderburgh County.

It also would put Indiana in a more competitive position with other states to attract companies that are sensitive to health care costs and to creating healthy environments for their employees.

From an economic standpoint, it is noteworthy that Indiana is attempting to profile itself as a leader in the life sciences field. There is something inconsistent and unconvincing about a state that promotes the development of health research businesses and facilities and yet does nothing to lessen its image as a state with high rate of smoking.

Let us hope that Indiana lawmakers make the time in January for serious consideration of Brown's bill.