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Time to snuff out public smoking Bill deserves attention, approval

EDITORIAL

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We're glad Rep. Charlie Brown is renewing his quest to ban smoking in public places this year. We hope his fellow lawmakers recognize the huge public-health stakes and take him more seriously this time around.

Last session, a similar bill proposed by the Gary Democrat died in a House committee after a brief hearing. Lawmakers were reluctant during that short session to address much beyond reforming property taxes.

This year, we fear, a host of other pressing matters could push the measure to the margins. The General Assembly will tackle badly needed reforms aimed at making local government more efficient. It also faces the Herculean task of writing a two-year budget that keeps the state on solid financial footing amid a deep economic downturn. Yet public health is a pressing issue, too.

Reams of scientific evidence tell us cigarette smoke doesn't kill just those who light up. In the meantime, the 76 percent of Hoosiers who don't smoke continue to be exposed to a known carcinogen. The medical community estimates that 1,000 to 1,800 people in Indiana will die each year as a result of secondhand smoke.

Unfortunately, too many lawmakers are willing to stand on the sidelines as the death toll rises. They argue that smoking bans are a symptom of heavy-handed government intruding too deeply into individuals' lives.

Such thinking fails to recognize that the government already protects citizens from others in a host of ways—from drunken-driving laws to restrictions on handling waste.

The cost to the health care system and to the companies and their employees who foot the bill should be compelling enough. Indiana estimates we spend more than \$2 billion annually on smoking-related medical expenses.

A majority of legislatures across the country have seen the light. Twenty-nine states, along with Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia, have laws banning smoking in some or all public places.

We applaud Brown for leading the fight here. This year's measure is even tougher than the one that flamed out last year. The latest bill covers bars and casinos—venues that all were excluded from last year's bill. Their powerful lobbyists are girding for a fight, armed with arguments that a ban would hurt business.

But evidence is scant to support gloom-and-doom scenarios. Marion County's ban, imposed in 2006, hasn't fueled a wave of business closings. It's one of 36 counties or communities in Indiana that already have smokefree ordinances of some kind.

A lot of good things have happened in Indiana to protect Hoosiers from the dangers of smoking in recent years. The state has plowed tens of millions of dollars from the federal tobacco settlement into education, marketing and enforcement programs aimed at curbing smoking rates. The investments have paid off. From 2000 to 2006, smoking among high school students fell 25 percent, and smoking among middle-school students slid 22 percent.

That's great news, but millions of Hoosiers who choose not to smoke remain at risk because of others' smoking habits. Lawmakers can't stand by and let that continue. •

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