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No cigarettes on stage this summer

Alderman delays his proposed exception to city smoking ban

By Hal Dardick

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Don't expect actors to light up on stage this summer in Chicago, at least not legally, after an alderman postponed his effort to carve out a theatrical exception to the city's smoking ban on Monday.

Ald. Brendan Reilly (42nd) said he needs time to change his proposed amendment to allow herbal cigarettes on stage and to work with state legislators to pass a companion law.

Opponents took his decision as an opportunity to ignite the debate, saying Reilly's proposal would be a lousy precedent that would endanger public health.

Reilly countered, deeming the amendment anti-censorship, pro-art and good for local theater business.

"I think that's the way to skin the cat while not censoring the theater industry," Reilly said.

He said he backs the city smoking ban but that his exception "makes sense."

"It basically follows in the footsteps of other progressive cities like New York," he said.

Ald. Ed Smith (28th), author of the Chicago smoking ban, questioned the safety of herbal cigarettes: "When you burn something, the carcinogens come out," he said.

Calling Reilly's proposal "bad precedent," Smith also said the ban doesn't deter theatrical productions from coming to town.

Smith was backed by a representative from the American Cancer Society as well as Joel Africk, president and chief executive officer of the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago.

"We're saying smoking doesn't belong in the theaters," Africk said. "It doesn't belong in any workplace."

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