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Right-to-breathe

Tuesday, Jan. 30 2007

About 80 percent of Illinois adults don't smoke. They shouldn't have to breathe anyone else's poisonous tobacco fumes either.

More than half of the state's residents already live in communities that recognize their right to go to a restaurant, walk through a public building or go to a game without breathing second hand smoke. That's good, but Illinois can take it one step further.

Illinois Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago, introduced a bill this month that would ensure clean indoor air throughout the state. It would allow the nonsmoking majority to breathe fresh air in all public places.

Tobacco is a hugely profitable industry with a long record of blowing smoke to cloud the facts about the health hazards of smoking. It still fans the fears of restaurant and bar owners that clean-air bills will cost them business when, in fact, most have more business after anti-smoking protections are put in place.

But no amount of overheated rhetoric should obscure the stakes: Tobacco is, by far, the leading preventable cause of death and disability in the United States.

It isn't only smokers who pay tobacco's price. On average, eight Illinois residents die every day — 2,900 people every year — from the effects of second hand smoke. Tobacco causes 16 percent of the state's deaths. Children growing up in homes with smokers are at dramatically increased risk of dying from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome or developing life-long chronic illnesses such as asthma. People who work in places where smoking is allowed, such as restaurants and bars, have significantly higher rates of cancer and lung or heart disease. And restaurant and bar employees are among the least likely to be offered health insurance through their jobs.

Mr. Cullerton's bill not only would protect the lungs of nonsmokers, but it also would give smokers an added incentive to quit. Most smokers know it's bad for their health, and most say they plan to stop ... some day. By making it more difficult to smoke on the job, the bill would give smokers a reason to stop right now.

But the bill faces an uphill fight in the Senate, which barred smoking in the Senate chambers just two years ago. Senate President Emil Jones, D-Chicago, must prevent the clean-air bill from being slowly strangled behind the scenes. It must be given a fair hearing in committee, then brought to the floor for a vote.

The overwhelming majority of Illinois residents are nonsmokers. They deserve the right to breathe free.

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