

Smoking ban hurts state budget

By Jim Nowlan

The 2007 ban on smoking in public places in Illinois has apparently cost the Illinois budget up to \$80 million a year because of reduced gambling on the state's casino boats. (Gamblers like to smoke as well.) State lawmakers are now being asked to lift the ban on smoking on the boats, at least until the nearest neighboring state to a casino also bans smoking.

Banning anything becomes a tough sell to me because of my civil libertarian beliefs that people in our society should have as much freedom of choice as possible. On the other hand, smoking kills, so we should do all we can to limit its health hazard. This dilemma reflects the difficulty I had as a state legislator in voting on bills when two good purposes were opposed to one another.

Students of gambling talk about the "gaming hold" (the amount casinos keep after paying out winnings; in other words, the amount gamblers lose). The gaming hold on Illinois casino boats dropped about \$275 million a year on average from 2007-2009, or about 15 percent. Using an estimated average tax of 30 percent for the state on the casino boat gaming hold, this represents about \$80 million in lost revenues annually to the state budget.

The recession played a part in this, yet the decline in gambling on casino boats in Indiana and Iowa in the same period was much less than in Illinois. Anywhere from 40-

70 percent of gamblers also smoke, according to casino operators, whereas only 20 percent of the larger public smokes. The ban has clearly driven some smoking gamblers to nearby states that don't ban smoking on boats, such as Indiana and Iowa.

The Legislative Research Unit of the Illinois General Assembly recently concluded in a report that, "The smoking ban must be a major contributing factor. . . ." in the decline in gambling on the Illinois boats.

So, should Illinois lawmakers lift the smoking ban on the casino boats?

In addition to lost revenue, the ban restricts choices in one's use of a legal product. It also changes behavior in that gamblers drive longer distances to gamble in other states.

And yet, second-hand smoke affects the health of those around smokers. The World Health Organization estimated recently that 600,000 people worldwide die each year of second-hand smoke, in addition to the 5 million who die from their own smoking.

Taxpayers also shoulder much of the burden for health care costs for those who develop cancer and heart disease as a result of smoking and from second-hand smoke.

Lifting the ban for casino boats would also, logically, result in the call for more exemptions from the statewide ban.

When two positives (freedom of choice and reduction in second-hand smoke) oppose on one another, then the balancing, as on a teeter-totter, must be done to see if one good or public benefit outweighs the other.

A non-smoker, I enjoy the benefits of the ban in restaurants. And many public policies restrict choice already. Social Security, Medicare and auto insurance laws

require our participation. And the new health care legislation also requires that we have health insurance in the future.

But when do restrictions on choice go too far? A smoking gambler is only hurting himself, if we can remove the second-hand smoke problem. The legislation does that by providing for separate rooms for the smoking and nonsmoking gamblers. I could vote for that.

If, however, the separate rooms compromise were not available, I would probably vote for continuing the ban. First, the second-hand smoke would affect non-smokers' health and, second, smokers could still legally smoke outside the premises of the boats.

Making public policy is not usually simple and straightforward. Difficult choices are often required, as in this proposal before the Illinois legislature.