

Lewiston Tribune, Monday, July 20, 2009 – Editorial by Marty Trillaase

Accepting health risks, along with the tips

If you choose to frequent a bar where smoking is allowed, that's your business. But pity the poor busboy, waiter or bartender. To earn a wage, they take the risks of inhaling secondhand smoke. And here's what the surgeon general says about that:

- Secondhand smoke contains at least 250 chemicals that are toxic or cause cancer.
- Within secondhand smoke are compounds that can be found in chemical weapons, automobile exhaust and paint thinners.
- Someone who breathes in secondhand smoke gets a higher dose of these poisons than the cigarette smoker himself.
- Working in a smoke-filled room damages the employee's cardiovascular and respiratory systems.

But, hey, it's a job. As much as a worker may not like it - or even conclude his odds are OK - he's not walking into the unemployment line in this economy. In 2004, Idaho shut down indoor smoking, except for bowling alleys and bars. Three years ago, lawmakers stopped smoking at bowling alleys.

Bars were excluded because they don't serve children. Sponsors also didn't want to draw more opposition than necessary, especially from the libertarian wing of the Republican Party. Included among them is Gov. Butch Otter, who vetoed expanding the ban to bowling alleys, only to be overridden by a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate.

Restaurants and bars are the last place to see smoking bans. Nationally, about 43 percent of people who work in these businesses have to tolerate secondhand smoke. Yet sponsors of Idaho's clean indoor-air act say they've seen no indication the statewide smoking ban has hurt businesses. In fact, they've heard reports that employee turnover has dropped. So has the cost of maintaining facilities in a smoke-free environment.

But given the governor's approach in 2007, it's possible imposing a state smoking ban on bars would require overriding his veto again. So scratch a new state law. Cities and counties can pass indoor-air quality ordinances that exceed the state's minimum. So far, no community has acted on it. Eagle approached the idea, but then backed away.

Now comes Moscow. City councilors in that community are contemplating a smoking ban on the community's 16 bars. Six of those establishments already prohibit smoking. A vote could come as early as this week or extend into the summer.

You can expect considerable debate about the rights of smokers or even the business owners involved. Some may even ask why Moscow should lead on this issue. Leave it to the state instead, All of which makes sense if you have the freedom to walk away. But dozens of people working in Moscow's night spots can't. Until the city council says otherwise, they're forced to weigh their incomes against their health. - M.T.