

Smoking ban accord exempts casino floors

People in Iowa bars would be prohibited from smoking but gamblers on casino floors could keep puffing under a proposed statewide tobacco ban compromise that a legislative panel reached Monday.

The decision could end weeks of disagreement among lawmakers about how far a smoking ban should go.

House members could vote as early as today on the compromise, which prohibits smoking in the majority of public places in Iowa.

„I'm optimistic we'll be able to get it passed," said Rep. Tyler Olson, a Cedar Rapids Democrat who led debate on the statewide ban in the House.

The smoking ban discussion began in January, soon after the legislative session started. Advocates, including Olson, tried to gain support for a ban in nearly all public places but quickly drew resistance from casinos and bar owners who said such a ban would hurt their businesses. Casino lobbyists distributed information to lawmakers estimating that the ban, by keeping gamblers away, would cut state tax revenue as much as USD 100 million a year.

As a way to gain legislators' support, House members in February agreed to exempt casinos from the ban. The Senate, however, embraced a stricter ban that included casinos.

The back-and-forth shuffling and revisions to the proposal, House File 2212, ended last month after the Senate rejected a House version that would have allowed smoking in casinos, bars and restaurants only during times when people under age 21 were denied access.

The bill was sent to a conference committee, which began trying to find a compromise.

The four Republicans on the committee voted against Monday's compromise, which would allow smoking only in areas of a casino where gambling occurs. Smoking would also be allowed in designated areas of the Iowa Veterans Home in Marshalltown.

Several Republicans questioned the altruism of Democrats, who said the objective of a ban is to protect Iowans from cancer-causing secondhand smoke. Bars and restaurants would be hurt by a ban, but casinos, which pump millions of dollars into the state budget, could mostly continue to allow smoking, they said.

„I guess I'm disappointed we're going to look after the interest of the revenue coming into the state but we're not concerned about revenues coming into privately owned businesses,“ said Rep. Chuck Soderberg, a Le Mars Republican.

Olson said the compromise was thought to be the toughest anti-smoking proposal that has a good chance of passage this year. Smoking opponents will probably propose extending the ban to all areas of casinos in future years, he said.

Wes Ehrecke, president of the Iowa Gaming Association, a trade group for Iowa's state-regulated casinos, expressed mixed emotions about the casino compromise. His group would prefer that casinos be allowed to make their own decisions about where to permit smoking, but he said allowing smoking on gaming floors is the most critical point.

„We think it should be a business decision and not a mandate,“ Ehrecke said.

The compromise cannot be amended by either chamber of the Legislature. Lawmakers must vote either for or against it.

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a Des Moines Democrat,

said last week that the House would probably vote on the issue within 24 hours after a compromise was reached. The proposed compromise, however, must still be officially written by legislative staff, which is a technical process that can take a day.

Senate Majority Leader Michael Gronstal, a Council Bluffs Democrat, said a majority vote for the ban in his chamber „is not guaranteed.“

The Senate will vote on the compromise when he believes he has the necessary number of votes to pass it, Gronstal said late Monday.