

Chicago Tribune | Editorial

## **The smoking ban stays**

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We were wondering how long it would take before the tobacco companies and their legislative allies would rev up their campaign to chip away at the statewide smoking ban that took effect Jan. 1. The answer: not long.

In recent weeks, some lawmakers have been pushing bills that would carve out exemptions to allow indoor smoking at many bars, riverboat casinos, strip clubs and American Legion halls.

But didn't we already have years of debate on this issue? And now opponents want to change things only a few weeks into the application of the new law?

Those bills look to be dead -- at least for now. That's good. These are misguided efforts to undo one of the most significant landmarks in Illinois public health history.

The trends in bans are clear, and they don't favor Big Tobacco. But that doesn't mean the tobacco companies are surrendering. Far from it. They're showering large amounts of cash on Illinois lawmakers in an attempt not just to peel back the ban but to block efforts to nearly double the state's cigarette tax.

In the four weeks before the Feb. 5 primary election, two tobacco behemoths contributed \$83,000 to 30 lawmakers, setting a monthly pace eclipsing the industry's largess in this state for at least a decade, according to a Tribune review of campaign finance records. About three-quarters of that money went to House Democrats.

"We've been the whipping boy for a number of [legislative] sessions now ... so we decided this year that we are going to participate in the process more heavily," said lobbyist John O'Connell, a former lawmaker who represents cigarette giant Reynolds American Inc. "We are still a legal industry. And it is a legal product."

Yes, it is legal. Legal and deadly.

So don't be surprised if tobacco interests roll out still more statistics and anecdotes from gambling boat owners and restaurateurs arguing that their business has been harmed by the smoking ban. Some businesses probably have been dinged by the ban. But many others have been boosted. Non-smokers are returning to some establishments now that they won't have to come home reeking of smoke. And don't forget the benefits of the new law to all those employees who are breathing easier without all that secondhand smoke.

From Jan. 1 through Feb. 13, Chicago logged just 293 reports of violations of the law, according to Tim Hadac of the city's Department of Public Health. About half of those

were from bars and restaurants, the rest from offices or apartment/condo buildings. Hadac said the violations tapered off dramatically in the first half of February.

That means countless Illinoisans have discovered the glory of clean air in that bar, restaurant or nightclub. And who knows how many smokers have used this ban to work up the gumption to quit? Since January, a coalition called Chicago Second Wind -- including the **Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago** and the Public Health Department -- has distributed more than 2,000 "quit kits" that provide tips and assistance for smokers to stop.

Our message to tobacco companies, bar owners or anyone else seeking to peel back this law is as clear as the air in our favorite restaurants: Forget it.

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