

Controversy smoulders over stage smoking ban

*Chi*Town Daily News*

BY JENNIFER SLOSAR

July 28, 2008 | 5:09 PM

Actors on stage could circumvent Chicago's smoking ban by lighting up herbal cigarettes under a compromise being pushed by an alderman in the city's theater district.

Alderman Brendan Reilly (D-42) said his proposal would allow the city to continue to attract world-class productions and preserve artistic integrity while maintaining the ban's health protections.

"I think it's a reasonable way to skin this cat ...while not censoring or dictating the content of play scripts to those who seek to open productions in Chicago," says Reilly.

Health groups and the head of City Council's health committee, however, are adamantly opposed to weakening the ban.

At Reilly's request, the city's cultural affairs committee today deferred action on the proposal until the state legislature decides whether to allow for an exemption to its smoking ban, which went into effect Jan. 1. The city must defer to state law on this issue.

Reilly said he's been in touch with state lawmakers, and expects Springfield to announce compromise legislation within days.

"My preference would that the state legislature mirror the city and carve out this specific exemption for herbal cigarettes," says Reilly.

At issue, says Reilly, is the vibrancy of the city's booming theater district, which is centered in his ward.

The alderman says he had recently heard from a Broadway producer and playwright who told him that, "we are at risk of diverting wonderful quality productions from the city of Chicago because we're forcing playwrights to alter their scripts."

New York City exempts live theater performances from its smoking ban, Reilly pointed out.

Reilly offered his proposal as a way to narrow an ordinance he introduced in early July that would allow for exemptions from the smoking ban for actors and actresses during

live performances. Earlier this month, the city forced the cast of the Broadway production "Jersey Boys" to extinguish their cigarettes after someone lodged a complaint about the on-stage puffing.

Under the measure, theaters would need to apply for waivers for individual productions to the city's public health department.

Ald. Ed Smith (D-28), chairman of the city's Committee on Health, said he is "bitterly opposed" to such a compromise.

"No matter what it is, you get carcinogens," says Smith.

"People are dying from second-hand smoke every day. Eight people a day," adds Smith. "It's a bad precedent."

"We're not in favor of smoking in any form," says Jacqueline Burgess-Bishop, regional vice president of the American Cancer Society. "We do not have the evidence to indicate that this is a safe alternative."

Joel Africk, president and CEO of the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago, says prop cigarettes that do not involve burning materials are the only acceptable alternative.

He said there are many cities where thriving theater coexists with comprehensive smoking bans.

"California's been smoke free for 10 years, and has a theater and film industry that far outstrips what we have in Illinois, and they have no exemption whatsoever," says Africk.