

SENATE REJECTS HOUSE CHANGES TO ANTI-SMOKING BILL

By Dena Potter

Associated Press Writer

The fate of proposed smoking restrictions in restaurants and bars was in limbo Monday after the Senate rejected attempts by the House of Delegates to weaken it further.

On an 11-28 vote, the Senate rejected amendments the House placed on Sen. Ralph Northam's bill that would have allowed smoking in restaurants and bars that were off-limits to minors and in areas of restaurants separated by either a door or an independent air system.

A compromise that had been worked out between Democratic Gov. Timothy M. Kaine and Republican House leadership called for smoking to be barred everywhere except in separately ventilated areas of restaurants and in private clubs.

The bill now goes back to the House. If it sticks to its changes, that would send the bill into negotiations between a small group of lawmakers from both houses.

A similar House version of the bill likely faces a similar fate.

Northam, a pediatric neurologist who has pushed a total smoking ban before, said the changes made by the House were unacceptable. He was optimistic, though, that negotiators could work to restore the compromise.

"We've had some very positive negotiations over the last week, and I think that over the next few days we will be able to get the bill back close to" the original agreement, said Northam, D-Norfolk.

Del. Terry Kilgore, R-Scott, said he doubted the bill could pass the House if his amendments were stripped out of it. The House endorsed the amended bill 59-39 last week.

"It's going to be tight," Kilgore said.

Kaine has said he did not like the amendments, but he did not commit to vetoing the bill if those changes remained on it. Last week's vote was shy of the 67 votes the 100-member House would need to overturn a veto.

Although advocates have said even the compromise version is too weak, lawmakers agree that an outright ban on smoking in all restaurants and bars would be all but impossible to pass. Virginia is one of the top tobacco-producing states, and lawmakers meet seven miles from the massive plant where Philip Morris churns out millions of Marlboros each day.