

## **A STRONGER ARGUMENT FOR SMOKING BAN**

### **Virginian Pilot Editorial**

When State Sen. Ralph Northam walks into the Capitol, he doesn't check his usual title, Doctor, at the door.

Northam sponsored legislation last winter to ban smoking in all Virginia bars and restaurants. The measure passed the Senate but was defeated in a six-member House subcommittee, meaning 94 delegates were not given a chance to vote on the issue.

In hopes of keeping the issue alive, Health Secretary Marilyn Tavenner proposed a compromise version that would ban smoking in bars and restaurants, but only until 10 p.m. The good doctor from Norfolk nixed the idea, saying, "It's better to do it the right way." He'll be back in Richmond next month with his plan for a full ban.

Northam deserves praise for his resolute commitment to public health, and Tavenner and Gov. Tim Kaine get credit for following his advice and shelving the flawed half-measure.

Northam and health-care advocates have new ammunition for their cause. Last month, researchers with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Harvard School of Public Health released a study showing that nearly 600 fewer people have died from heart attacks annually in that state since a ban went into effect four years ago.

The 30 percent decline reflects a combination of factors, including advances in cardiac care and stepped-up education on diet, but researchers said those other influences don't fully explain the trends. Their data show heart attacks dropping first in Boston when it adopted its own smoking ban, with the rest of the state following after the broader restrictions became law in 2004.

One reason for the decline is that the bans motivate people to stop smoking. But there is also evidence that even 30-minute exposure to second hand smoke can damage the cardiovascular system, meaning non-smokers are also healthier because of the ban.

Although Gov. Kaine has discarded Tavenner's proposal, other alternatives are likely to emerge during the 2009 General Assembly session. The tobacco industry understands the momentum is against it, and its lobbyists are looking for a way to cut their losses.

One option getting attention is an idea first floated by Chesapeake Del. John Cosgrove in 2007 that would require restaurants built after a certain date to have a separate room with its own ventilation system for smokers.

Like the Tavenner proposal, this bill has significant shortcomings. It discriminates between restaurants, and it fails to meet public demand for smoke-free dining. Imagine the confusion that would be created if the idea is tried and, inevitably, discarded.

During Phase One, older restaurants could continue to permit smoking, and some new establishments would go to great expense to do the same. Unhappy constituents would press legislators to revisit the issue. Under Phase Two, older restaurants would ban smoking while newer ones scrambled for an exemption so they could recoup the thousands of dollars they spent on ventilation equipment.

No such gyrations and contortions can change the fact that a solid majority of Virginians want their restaurants to be smoke-free. Legislators should keep it simple and give the people what they want. It's just what the doctor ordered.