

GOP Lawmakers Report Compromise on Smoking Ban

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RICHMOND, Feb. 4 -- House Speaker William J. Howell has thrown his support behind a ban on smoking in bars and restaurants, a major reversal that could help the legislation accelerate through the General Assembly, GOP delegates said Wednesday.

In recent years, proposals to ban smoking have been defeated in the Republican-controlled House, with Howell quietly blocking attempts to bring them to the floor for a vote.

But Howell told Republican House members Wednesday afternoon that he now supports a "limited" smoking ban. Howell told delegates he met with Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D), who has made the ban one of his top legislative priorities, and the two men agreed to move forward with a compromise, lawmakers said.

Howell told his caucus that he and Kaine plan a news conference, perhaps as early as Thursday, to announce an agreement.

On Tuesday, the Democrat-controlled Senate approved four bills that would outlaw smoking in bars, restaurants and public places. Howell and Kaine agreed to draft a narrower version of the Senate bills, though some details are unresolved, sources familiar with the discussions said. Some legislators said they are hopeful that the compromise would allow for limited smoking in bars during certain hours but not in eating areas.

Howell declined to comment Wednesday but said, "You'll find out tomorrow." Lynda Tran, a Kaine spokeswoman, also declined to comment.

Even with Howell's support, a smoking ban will face obstacles in the House.

In 2007, Kaine tried to slip a ban past House leaders by attaching it as an amendment to a bill. But 10 House Democrats, including House Minority Leader Ward L. Armstrong (D-Henry), helped defeat Kaine's amendment.

GOP delegates said Howell, who controls prized committee assignments, has told them they can vote freely, without fear of retribution.

"Everybody has got to make up their own mind," said House Majority Leader H. Morgan Griffith (R-Salem).

One GOP delegate, who declined to be identified because caucus meetings are supposed to be confidential, said Howell told them he was backing a ban because of the looming elections.

Since 2003, Democrats have gained 11 seats. All 100 House seats are up for election in November. Democrats will take over the majority if they can pick up six seats this fall.

Public and private polls show strong support for a smoking ban, especially in the state's Democratic-leaning north, where several GOP delegates could face strong challenges this year.