

Community reacts to Champaign's repeal of smoking ban

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As the NBA Western Conference Semifinals were being played in the background on Wednesday at Legends, Thomas Malladi, a recent graduate from LAS, commented, "I appreciate not having to take a shower when I come home from the bars because of the smoke."

However, because of the repeal of a smoking ban by the Champaign City Council, this may not be case for much longer.

On Tuesday, the Champaign City Council reversed a smoking ban in a 5-4 decision. The resolution comes on the heels of state legislation that will make Illinois smoke free if Governor Blagojevich signs it. With reports saying that he is enthusiastic about the bill, it is all but certain that Illinois will have an all-inclusive ban by the beginning of 2008.

For Deputy Mayor Michael J. La Due, a vocal opponent of the ban, this decision gets to a greater issue.

"Some might ask why (repeal it, considering we just passed the ban), but it is really just an assertion of our local self-determination," La Due said. "We are facing a comprehensive statewide ban, but were not a Chicago suburb."

For La Due and others like him, the legislature's bill is a strike at local municipal control. Thus, the ban reversal was an expression of a community's right to exert control.

"No bar owners are compelled to allow smokers," La Due said. "It's their decision. The (state) legislature should respect local choice."

Even before the ban, a large portion of restaurants was voluntarily smoke free.

"The market tends towards equilibrium, let it be that way," La Due said.

For the minority that does smoke, the constant wrangling of legislation has been tiresome.

Maria Agathou, a grad student in the College of Engineering, does not deny that the ban has had an effect.

"Many of my friends did change their habit," Agathou said. "But what I have a problem with is that everyone is treating smokers like they have a problem. I am an adult. I know the negative effects, but I choose to do it, and that is my choice."

The group on campus that has been most effected by this decision has been conspicuously silent. Many bars, including Murphy's Pub, Legends and Joe's Brewery, either choose not to comment on this issue or had not returned phone calls at the time of writing. However, with overall food and beverage receipts in Champaign up almost eight percent from March 2006 compared to March 2007, the claim that the smoking ban has caused revenue loss is on shaky ground.

Despite the disappointment nonsmokers might feel as a result of this reversal, it is obvious that the entire picture is politically and socially complex.

Malladi epitomized the common nonsmoker's view.

"Beyond all the health issues, its nice not walking around smelling like smoke," he said.

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