

Written by Administrator
Thursday, 20 January 2011 20:32 -

By TOM DAVIES

INDIANAPOLIS

The latest attempt to impose a statewide smoking ban cleared its first step in the Legislature on Wednesday.

The Indiana House Public Health Committee voted 9-3 to endorse the bill prohibiting smoking in public places and indoor work sites -- after

it exempted casinos and pari-mutuel horse tracks from the ban.

Supporters said the casino exemption was needed to give the bill a chance at becoming law after the nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency estimated the state could lose more than \$180 million a year in casino taxes under a smoking ban.

Rep. Eric Turner, R-Marion, urged the committee to approve the bill, saying more than three dozen states already have similar bans.

"It is time for Indiana to move in that direction," Turner said. "The argument that business will be hurt by this, I just don't buy it."

The House has passed smoking bans the past two years, but the bills haven't won Senate approval.

Supporters believe the ban might have a better chance this year since Senate President Pro Tem David Long, R-Fort Wayne, has said he would consider giving it a hearing if it exempted casinos. Gov. Mitch Daniels also has said he would sign a ban into law.

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The bill that passed the House last year also exempted bars, taverns and fraternal clubs -- and some lawmakers are expected to push for similar exemptions when it is debated in the full House.

Rep. Charlie Brown, D-Gary, a leading smoking ban advocate for several years, said he would fight an exemption for bars and that he believed the casino tax loss under a ban was overestimated.

"Even in the case of the smokers, they will drop off for a while, but they love gaming so they're going to come back even though they need to give up one vice to participate in another vice," Brown said.

Rep. Dave Frizzell, R-Indianapolis, voted against the bill in the committee, arguing that the state should not place such a mandate on businesses.

Brown said the 19 new Republicans who gave the GOP control of the 100-member House this session are wild cards.

"I don't know where the balance of all these new members hearing this debate for the first time will fall," Brown said.

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