

Matthew Tully: Struggle ends, at last, with a solid smoking ban for Indianapolis

City-County Councilmen John Barth and Jeff Miller were smiling as they stood among dozens of people at a Northside neighborhood meeting Thursday evening. The smiles were the result of a call Barth had received seconds earlier from the mayor's office, telling him that Mayor Greg Ballard had just signed into law a solid smoking ban that Barth had guided through the council.

It took too long and the politics were nothing short of tortured, stretching back over a decade. But it's finally done. Marion County has joined cities and towns all over the country, and all over Indiana, with bans that protect most workers -- whether they tend bar or clean up hotel rooms. As of June 1, such workers will be guaranteed the protections those of us who work in offices have long taken for granted.

With Ballard's signature, the county's weak seven-year-old ban -- the one riddled with exemptions -- has been replaced with one that's worth celebrating. Indianapolis now catches up with cities as big as New York and as small as Franklin, Indiana. We can finally stop talking -- and writing -- about a problem that should have been resolved long ago.

All I can say is, Hallelujah!

Well, on behalf of the people of Indianapolis, and the hundreds of thousands who visit the city every year, I should also say thanks to those advocates who refused to give up despite years of setbacks. Without the work of the folks at Smoke Free Indy, along with council members such as Barth, Miller, Ben Hunter, Angela Mansfield and President Maggie Lewis, this issue would have remained unaddressed for many more years to come.

"It's a good positive change for the city," a relieved Barth said Friday morning.

Barth, who joined the council in January after years as a neighborhood activist, returned home late Thursday after a series of meetings and was greeted by his excited kids. After hearing that the smoking ban had been signed, 8-year-old Miles had decorated the house with celebratory posters and 9-year-old Nora had baked congratulatory muffins.

"Of all the issues we've worked on, this is the thing that they've cared about the most," Barth said. "They've grown up in an environment and in a time when smoking is just not OK."

Barth, whose day job is to manage a Medicaid program, said the most important aspect of the ban is the protection on workers' health. But, he added, there's a serious financial implication to secondhand smoke -- in Medicaid costs and increased insurance premiums.

"The libertarian argument that this is strictly an individual issue just doesn't hold up," he said. "There are real public health and tax consequences for other citizens."

For Mayor Ballard, the end of this debate must be a relief. The issue has dogged him for years like a bad nicotine habit. He's flipped and flopped, backing off a campaign promise to sign a comprehensive ban during his first term and then backing himself into an awkward corner with promises made to private clubs. He vetoed one ordinance earlier this year and then, Thursday, signed one that was almost identical.

As if he wanted the issue to just go away, Ballard signed the ordinance within an hour of returning to town from a trip to Boston. His office announced the news with an understated, nine-word message on Twitter: "I just signed into law the smoking ban ordinance."

It was a short message, but a big accomplishment.

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