

[HOME](#) / [NEWS](#) / [NEWS](#) /

Wisconsin bill would allow electronic cigarettes in public

Health officials are opposed, citing unknown risks

BY ERIN BERGE

JANUARY 16, 2014

[RSS](#)

ERIN BERGE

Caffentzis prefers e-cigarettes so he can smoke indoors and not smell from smoke.

As Alex Caffentzis exhaled, he carefully hid the water vapor of his electronic cigarette from those sitting near him at the Memorial Union.

"People start to look at you very strange," says Caffentzis, a 20-year-old student at Madison College.

It's been more than three years since Wisconsin passed its indoor smoking ban, and locals now find it unusual to see smoke in a public area. It is unclear, however, whether exhaling water vapor from an electronic cigarette in public is illegal.

The Wisconsin indoor smoking ban prohibits smoking any device in public that contains tobacco. But it is silent on whether electronic cigarettes fall under the ban.

Sen. Glenn Grothman (R-West Bend) introduced a **bill** in December that would allow people to puff e-cigarettes in public by exempting the devices from the state smoking ban.

The bill has been sent to the Senate Judiciary and Labor Committee, which Grothman chairs. The senator says he hopes to hold a public hearing on the bill by late January or early February.

Caffentzis switched from regular cigarettes because he wanted to be able to smoke indoors and not smell from smoke. He says electronic cigarettes also give him more control over the amount of tobacco consumed since the nicotine comes in liquid form.

Four health groups have registered in **opposition to** SB 440 on the Government Accountability Board's website: American Cancer Society Action Network, the American

Heart Association, the American Lung Association in Wisconsin Inc. and Health First Wisconsin (formerly Smoke Free Wisconsin). No groups have registered in support.

Ryan Sheahan, coordinator for the [Tobacco-Free Columbia-Dane County Coalition](#), says puffing on e-cigarettes is not necessarily a safe alternative to inhaling tobacco smoke.

"The industry likes to use the term 'harm reduction,' but it's really not harm reduction, it's 'harm shifting,'" says Sheahan.

Supporters say e-cigarettes can wean smokers off regular cigarettes by providing nicotine stimulation while protecting lungs from tobacco. But Sheahan says electronic cigarettes could just as easily encourage individuals to smoke as help them quit.

"There is not enough data on electronic cigarettes yet to know whether it is beneficial or harmful," he says.

Like a bedroom vaporizer

Grothman says electronic cigarettes are a way for people to get a nicotine fix safely.

"You save a lot of money and save on your health. Go for it."

He says moves by some "public health extremists" to regulate the device remind him of an H.L. Mencken quote: "Puritanism: the haunting fear that someone, somewhere is having a good time."

Grothman says he's been around someone using an electronic cigarette and couldn't smell anything.

"It's like having a vaporizer in your bedroom, good grief."

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration was expected to propose rules regulating the cigarettes in October, but the government shutdown this fall likely delayed their release, [according to Consumer Reports](#).

The Partnership at Drugfree.org reports that Utah, North Dakota, Arkansas, New Jersey and the District of Columbia include e-cigarettes in indoor smoking bans. California, Connecticut and Massachusetts are considering similar legislation.

The group also reports that U.S. sales of e-cigarettes are projected to reach \$1.5 billion in 2013, triple the figure from 2012.

In Wisconsin, minors are prohibited from purchasing e-cigarettes as they are considered nicotine products. But for all others, they're a good buy compared to regular cigarettes since they are not subject to the state's excise tax.

They are certainly a cheaper habit for Caffentzis; his usual smokes cost about \$10 a week.

Caffentzis purchased his electronic cigarette kit, including the electronic cigarette, three liquid cartridges and a charger, for \$54 in early 2013. By year's end he still did not need to refill the cartridges.

Sheahan fears that if electronic cigarettes are not banned soon in Wisconsin, there could be unknown health risks for users.

"That's the danger in it -- before it kicks off too strong, we need to have it under control," he says.

Despite the health concerns, Caffentzis is not yet ready to abandon his e-cigarettes: "It's not necessarily been proven to be detrimental to me yet, so I'll probably still use it for a while."

[Editor's note: This article was corrected to reflect that minors are prohibited in Wisconsin from purchasing e-cigarettes.]

[RSS](#)

[COMMENTS](#)

Type subject here...

NEWS	OPINION	FOOD & DRINK	A & E	MUSIC	SCREENS	EVENTS
News	Opinion	Reviews	Visual Arts	Music Calendar	Movies	Calendar
Cover Stories	Citizen Dave	Beer	Books	Isthmus Live Sessions	TV & Video	Isthmus Picks
Snapshot	Savage Love	Food for Thought	Comedy	Vinyl Cave	Games	Isthmus Events
Madweek	Cartoons	Food News	Emphasis	Picks Playlists		Photo Galleries
	Feedback	Isthmus Dining	Stage			
		Behind the Brews				
		Car to Table				
		Restaurant Directory				