

Interview with Sen. Fred Risser, July 2010

Posted on Thursday, Mar 26, 2020

This interview first appeared on WisPolitics.com July 6, 2010.

Sen. Fred Risser is expecting a few bumps in the road as the statewide workplace smoking ban becomes law this week.

In an interview with WisPolitics, Risser, D-Madison, remembers there were some initial problems when his hometown adopted one of the first indoor smoking bans in the state five years ago.

“Anyone complains when there’s a change. A lot of people don’t like change,” said Risser, who has been a main advocate for a ban for years. “But I think it will work out very well.”

Risser notes that when Madison went smoke free, some fretted that the move would send people to taverns and restaurants in neighboring communities. But in subsequent years, Madison didn’t repeal the ban; the municipalities around Madison adopted their own smoke-free ordinances.

“I know it will work out because it has always worked out. It worked out in other states; it has worked out in other communities. No place has ever wanted to go back,” Risser said.

Risser, who turned 83 in May, was elected to the Assembly in 1956 and then to the Senate in a 1962 special election. He remembers when the term “smoke-filled caucus rooms” was true.

“The caucus rooms were so smoke-filled that you couldn’t concentrate,” Risser said.

Risser authored a bill that prohibited smoking in the state Capitol two decades ago.

“We had certain leadership in the Capitol that said ‘No way are we going to eliminate smoking,’” Risser said. “I can remember one leader tell me that he or she

had constituents come in, they got nervous, and they had to smoke to calm their nerves.”

Times have changed, and Risser said there has been a “360 degree change” in attitudes toward smoking, though he never doubted the day would come when a broader ban would become law.

“I thought we’d get it eventually,” he said. “The public wants it – 80 percent of the public doesn’t smoke. No poll I have ever seen shows a majority of people polled want smoking in indoor areas.”

Risser doesn’t think the development of outdoor smoking rooms by taverns violates the intent of the law.

“If a tavern wants to build a smoking area that is not an enclosed area, they have a right to do that,” Risser said.

“The Tavern League is trying to put their best foot forward on this,” Risser said. “They have a public relations problem with their group, and they’re trying to tell their group under certain circumstances they can develop smoking areas, which is part of the compromise.”

Risser is the longest-serving legislator in state history and currently the longest-serving state legislator in the country. He says he has no desire to retire, but he’s cautious about saying he’ll run again in 2012.

“I don’t know (if I’ll run again). I haven’t the slightest idea,” he said. “It depends on my health. It depends on my personal situation. It depends on a number of things. I never thought I’d be here this long.”

Risser also talks about his priorities for the next session, the competitive primary race in the 77th Assembly District, which is within his Senate district, and the redistricting battle that will come next year.