

House committee votes to exempt bars, casinos from anti-smoking ordinances

By Dan Gearino, Globe Des Moines Bureau

DES MOINES — The debate over local control of smoking restrictions got thrown for a loop Monday when an Iowa House committee approved a plan to exempt casinos and bars from local anti-smoking ordinances.

The exemption was tacked onto a proposal that would allow cities and counties to pass local smoking bans.

Anti-smoking advocate Threase Harms-Hassoun, a lobbyist for Clean Air for Everyone, said the exemption is a poison pill.

“We’re very discouraged by the action today,” she said.

The House Local Government Committee voted 12-8 to amend the local control bill to include the exemption. The committee then voted 11-9 to recommend the amended bill for debate on the House floor.

Wes Ehrecke, president of the Iowa Gaming Association, a casino industry group, said the exemption is needed to give state-licensed casinos the flexibility to respond to competition from tribal casinos and other states.

“We appreciate the legislators understand of the importance of the gaming industry in the state,” he said.

Rep. Geri Huser, D-Altoona, whose district includes Prairie Meadows Racetrack and Casino, led the push for the exemption.

Opponents said the idea of exempting specific types of businesses flies in the face of local control.

“Allow the debate to happen at the local level,” said Rep. Donovan Olson, D-Boone.

The action Monday means anti-smoking activists will pin their hopes on a proposal in the Iowa Senate.

The Senate version allows local smoking restrictions, with no exemptions.