EDITORIAL

Gambling With Lives

Asked to choose between the casinos and the health of the people who work in them, Atlantic City has sided with the casinos. The City Council voted in October to allow smoking in the city's gambling parlors for at least another year — a complete cave-in to the industry and a cruel insult to hundreds of dealers, waiters and other casino workers who will continue to be exposed to the demonstrable risks of secondhand smoke.

Six months ago, following testimony from employees about the discomforts and dangers of working in a smoke-filled atmosphere, the Council voted 9 to 0 to make the casinos smoke-free as of Oct. 15. But after heavy pressure from casino executives, who complained that revenue had dropped 10 percent after the ban took effect and warned of bigger losses down the road, the Council reversed course and voted to suspend the ban for a year. The suspension began on Sunday.

So much for political courage.

Under the moratorium, Atlantic City's casinos will still be required to make 75 percent of their floor space smoke-free. But even that will provide less clean air than one might expect, mainly because there are few partitions between the smoking and nonsmoking areas.

The Council certainly needed to take a far more skeptical look at industry's claims that the ban — and not the weakening economy — caused the revenue loss. They would have quickly discovered that revenues at casinos in Las Vegas, which allow smoking, also have dropped drastically, and the casino industry almost everywhere is suffering. In addition, many gamblers have told reporters that they like a smoke-free atmosphere.

The eventual outcome is unclear. One councilman, John Schultz, had this to say after voting to suspend a ban that he had originally supported: "Gaming is about smoking, drinking and gambling. It all goes together. It's all sin."

Perhaps, but it seems the greater sin is to threaten the health and, indeed, the lives of the people who work in the casinos.