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Monica Yant Kinney: Casinos and regulators blind to smoking rules



By Monica Yant Kinney

Inquirer Columnist

A couple walk into Parx Casino on a Friday night. They ask the uniformed greeter where to find the nonsmoking section. His name is Frank, but his answer is vague.

"Walk toward the green carpet in the middle," Frank says, adding that he's not entirely sure himself. "We don't have signs. We just tell people where to go."

So off Robb and Gloria Tuckey walk, with me trailing behind. We hike through a sea of smoke to the island oasis to find . . . even more smoke. Throat-drying, eye-watering smoke. Oddly, much of it coming from folks oblivious to the dime-size no-smoking symbols on the slot machines devouring their cash.

"My eyes burn and I start this dry cough as soon as I walk in the door," laments Gloria Tuckey, 55, a school administrator from Northeast Philadelphia.

"It's too bad, because we like coming here. This place is fun, fun, fun."

I spend two hours with the Tuckeys before I'm gagging goodbyes. That the empty-nesters stay until 1:30 a.m. speaks to both their boredom and a will to win. Rarely does fun, fun, fun make the seeker feel so sick, sick, sick.

Breathe deeply

The otherwise well-intentioned 2008 Pennsylvania Clean Air Act lets casinos devote half the gaming floor to smoking. Operators may set up and designate the zones however they see fit.

Harrah's, in Chester, features huge rotating neon signs to guide players. I breathed deeply in many parts of the casino, but found it unappetizing to nosh at the buffet under a smoke plume. (A Harrah's PR rep texted me: "I don't think we will participate in your story.")

At Parx, the popular and profitable slots box in Bensalem, overhead arrows offer nonsmokers no relief. The "green carpet" zone by no means takes up 50 percent of the gaming floor, and other smoke-free machines seem to be scattered haphazardly. On my hunt, I measure the distance between the Wild Flurry (nonsmoking) and Super-Hot Jackpot (smoking): six steps.

I ask Parx for illumination, but spokeswoman Carrie Nork Minelli ignores my questions. Casino regular Robb Tuckey, 56, works in construction and has his own theory about the master plan.

"Nobody's playing on the green carpet," he says, "because they put the old, boring games in there."

"Today, gamers are looking for more entertainment: more screens, more action. All those new, fun multidimensional games are in the smoking section."

Waiting, wheezing

Biophysicist and former EPA official James Repace has spent 30 years wiping his eyes in the study of secondhand smoke. He secretly tested air quality at Harrah's and Parx in 2007 - one-word review: toxic - and suspects it's worse under the bogus partial smoking ban.

"If you draw an imaginary line on the floor," Repace asks, "how does the smoke know where to stop?"

Sequestering smokers actually leads to a higher concentration of smoke throughout the casino, Repace adds, increasing the risk of heart disease, blood clots, and cancer for workers and players alike.

"Frankly," he says, "it's insane to allow smoking in casinos."

The smoke might annoy me, but it's dangerous to people like Charles Ihlenfeld, a 69-year-old lung cancer survivor with an oxygen mask who filed a complaint about Parx to the state.

"I used to go to Parx on Sunday mornings after I watched Mass on TV," the Port Richmond man tells me, "but I had to stop because I get light-headed from all the smoke."

A Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board spokesman contends that enforcing the clean-air law in casinos falls to the Department of Health. The Health Department insists that task belongs to the gaming board.

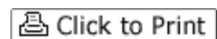
While bureaucrats bicker and the casinos cower, the Tuckeys wonder whether their slots habit is really good clean fun, fun, fun.

"I think about the smoke all the time now," Gloria Tuckey says between spins. "Coming to Parx is a night out for us. Is this really where we want to be?"

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