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Monica Yant Kinney: Is the fix in for casino smoking?



By Monica Yant Kinney

Inquirer Columnist

The 2008 Clean Indoor Air Act banned smoking in most public places in Pennsylvania, but let casinos designate 25 percent of their gaming floors for lighting up. Built into the law was a laughable escape clause allowing casinos to double smoking sections if operators could show they took in less money in the smoke-free zones.

Mere months after the law passed, Parx, in Bensalem, documented a 275 percent difference in "performance" between smoking and nonsmoking slots machines. Five other casinos invoked the clause in spades, showing that players spend 100 to 185 percent more when they smoke and spin at the same time.

Curious about the dramatic stats, State Rep. Curt Schroder (R., Chester), the minority chair of the Gaming Oversight Committee, paid a reconnaissance visit to Harrah's in Chester.

He found higher-stakes roulette and blackjack machines exclusively for smokers - some betting \$15 a hand. Lower-stake slots permeated the smoke-free zone.

"This," Schroder wrote casino operators, "causes me to ask whether, in fact, machines were arranged on your floor to guarantee an outcome that would allow you to request a larger smoking area."

Blown off

In a series of letters written in early 2009, Schroder implored the casinos to consider their workers' and patrons' health. And he urged the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board (PGCB) and Independent Regulatory Review Commission (IRRC) to deny the expansions while studying slots placement and whether casinos make nonsmoking zones hard to find.

The legislator was blown off by all parties, including the one with the acronym that rhymes with *irk*. Schroder still winces at the casinos' "impenetrable" arrogance.

"There's no doubt," he told me, "the casino industry gets everything it wants in this state."

Right now, what the industry wants is for me to disappear under a smoke plume for daring to write about how

impossible it is to find a breath of fresh air in casinos.

"When I first went to Parx, I, too, asked where the nonsmoking section was," one reader wrote after last week's column. "The people at the desk explained that it was in the middle of the room, surrounded by the smoking section. I really thought they were kidding, but they assured me they were not."

Another weary regular dubbed Parx a "smoke bomb." Others still pay to play, but fear for their lives.

Marilyn Wilder of Southampton, Bucks County, played video poker at Parx three times a week. Sick of feeling sick, she finally turned in her card and told the casino to remove her from its mailing lists.

"I really enjoyed going to the casino, but now I play at home on my computer," Wilder, 65, told me. "I'm richer and healthier for it."

Put it out

I shared Wilder's comments with a Parx spokeswoman, who e-mailed a statement saying Parx will soon distribute casino maps to patrons.

"We could have enforced the smoking and nonsmoking boundaries more aggressively," wrote Carrie Nork Minelli, adding that staff will "step up their vigilance."

Neither Schroder nor I believe the industry can or should police itself. He'd love to have hearings on casino smoking, but the committee's majority party chairman, State Rep. Dante Santoni Jr. (D., Berks), controls the schedule. "I've had meetings in casinos and don't see a problem," Santoni told me. "If there's a complaint about smoking, they deal with it. The process is working."

He's referring to the PGCB, which stations staff inside all nine of the state's casinos.

Statewide to date, compliance officers have investigated 87 smoking complaints, including 21 at Parx.

Some process: Of those 87 complaints, not one resulted in an enforcement action at any casino.

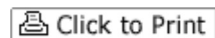
Monica Yant Kinney: For More Information

To file a casino smoking complaint, call 1-877-835-9535 or go to www.pgcb.state.pa.us

Reach me at myant@phillynews.com or 215-854-4670. Visit my web page and connect on Facebook and Twitter at philly.com/kinney.

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