

Casinos blow hot and cold on smoking policy

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ATLANTIC CITY - They're hard to miss. Follow the smell, or the smoke billowing over their slot machines. Gambler-smokers are as much a fixture at casinos as cocktail waitresses in skimpy outfits.

But are gambling and smoking inextricably linked?

"They go together," Paul Fischer, a limousine driver from Clifton, N.J., said as he took a puff while playing a \$1 slot at the Borgata recently.

"Every time I push a button on a slot machine, it goes hand-in-hand with the nicotine going to my brain," said Fischer, 62, who has been smoking for four decades. "It's the best of both worlds."

Christine LaCoste, an EMT from Bayville, Ocean County, said she experiences a similar craving whenever she's at a casino.

"Everything starts in your head and works its way down," LaCoste said, her left hand holding a cigarette and her right hand working a penny slot at Caesars on Wednesday. "It's an adrenalin rush. Even when I stopped smoking . . . I'd go to a casino and buy cigarettes."

Eleven of Atlantic City's 12 casinos permit smoking on 25 percent of their gaming floors. All except Revel, which is completely nonsmoking and has taken heat for it.

In Pennsylvania, all 11 casinos permit smoking on 50 percent of their floors.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta estimates that one in every four gamblers smokes; past studies by the University of Nevada, Reno, put the number at 20 percent to 25 percent. **In Atlantic City's primary gambling market, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York, about 85 percent of adults do not smoke, the CDC said.**

Though there is no definitive research to explain the apparent connection between gambling and smoking, interviews with a half-dozen random patrons at Atlantic City and Pennsylvania casinos found that among those who smoked - four of the six - lighting up at a casino came naturally, and that income level had nothing to do with the affinity for doing both.

For Revel, the issue is a touchy one. The \$2.4 billion mega-casino has been struggling since it opened April 2 as Atlantic City's first fully nonsmoking casino.

Whether Revel - which last month finished next-to last among the dozen casinos in gross gaming revenue - is being hurt financially because gamblers

can't smoke there, or whether that's just one of several factors ailing it, is difficult to say.

"The only way to find out for sure would be to allow smoking in Revel and see if there is an uptick," said analyst Joe Weinert of Spectrum Gaming Group L.L.C. in Linwood, N.J. "Problem is, once the decision is made to allow smoking, it is difficult to unscramble the egg."

David G. Schwartz, author of *Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling* and director of the Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, said, "Anecdotally, yes, there is a link" between smoking and gambling. "It's possible that it's part of a greater risk-taking personality type.

"Those who think they can buck the odds and win at casino games may be more likely to believe they can evade the statistical probabilities of contracting debilitating diseases as the result of smoking," Schwartz said.

That theory holds up for Fischer, the limo driver: "If you're into gambling, it's a thing of chance. With smoking, people are definitely addicted to it."

"I'm not an addict," insisted Fischer, who said he smokes a pack a day. "I just enjoy it - except when I'm gambling, it becomes out of control."

Tony Page, 50, who's stationed at Fort Dix, said he, too, burns through more cigarettes when he's gambling. And being a smoker, he said, comes with certain sacrifices.

"I don't play the machines I like in the nonsmoking area," Page said Thursday at Parx in Bensalem. "I can only stay for a minute."

Two nonsmokers who frequent casinos had a different take on the matter.

Florida retiree Dennis Kuda, 65, sat in front of a slot machine in the nonsmoking section of Caesars on Wednesday.

"You don't need to smoke to have a good time," Kuda said. "But as long as they don't blow smoke in my face, I'm fine with it."

Not Don Matmon. He said the nonsmoking and smoking blackjack tables were so close together at Tropicana that it didn't matter where he sat because the smoke traveled.

"The proximity is very annoying," Matmon, 64, who lives in Marlboro Township, Monmouth County, said as he placed his chips on a nonsmoking blackjack table just before midnight. "The smoke gets in my face. I hate it."

Last year, Israel "Izzy" Posner, executive director of the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, conducted a random online-sample survey of 3,056 adults in nine mid-Atlantic markets regarding smoking and luxury casino resorts. Collection of the data was funded by Revel.

"We discovered five times as many people overall preferred, and were attracted to, a nonsmoking resort than saw it as an issue," Posner said. "One in five smokers even said they preferred a nonsmoking environment."

But Dennis M. Farrell Jr., managing director of gaming, lodging and leisure research at Wells Fargo Securities L.L.C., said gaming revenue at nonsmoking casinos nationally indicated otherwise.

"Gaming markets that have initiated a full smoking ban have seen gaming revenues decline by at least 15 percent, which in turn has contributed to 20 to 25 percent cash-flow declines at the gaming facilities," Farrell said. "Within the gaming industry, there is a high correlation of gaming and smoking."

Yet commercial, non-tribal casinos in New York, which are all smoke-free, may be bucking the trend, said clean-air advocate Karen Blumenfeld.

She cited the performance of Aqueduct Racetrack and Empire City Casino at Yonkers Raceway - currently ranked No. 1. and No. 2 in gross gaming revenue among racetracks with slot machines nationwide.

"We're not really seeing the correlation where the [casino] industry has said that the only people that gamble smoke," said Blumenfeld, who is executive director of GASP, Global Advisors of Smokefree Policy, which is based in Summit, N.J., and promotes tobacco-free lives and smoke-free air for nonsmokers.

"Casinos in Ohio, Delaware, Maryland and Maine are all smoke-free," she said. "Developers are bidding for licenses in Massachusetts for smoke-free casinos. That leads one to believe that they believe a smoke-free casino model will make them money."

Despite its slow start, Revel chief executive officer Kevin DeSanctis said the casino has no immediate plans to change its nonsmoking policy.

"A significant proportion of our visitors do not smoke, and more than 90 percent of the comments we have received are positive and in favor of Revel remaining smoke-free," he said Thursday.

That makes the decision easy for Fischer. Although he's dropped off limo customers at Revel, and promotional mailings from the casino are piling up at his home, he said he has no desire to ever venture inside.

"I won't even go there," he said. "You want to light up while you're gambling."

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