



## **Atlantic City Council unanimous on casino smoking ban, takes effect Oct. 15**

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ATLANTIC CITY - A relentless fight to protect casino workers from secondhand smoke ended Wednesday with a historic vote by city legislators outlawing smoking on the resort's 11 casino floors.

Before a packed chamber of casino workers and anti-smoking advocates, City Council's nine members approved an ordinance that will clear the smoke from all city gaming floors by Oct. 15. The measure does allow casinos to build separately ventilated smoking rooms that cannot be staffed.

The vote was followed by more than a minute-long standing ovation and chants of "thank you!"

Supporters of the ban wasted no time after the measure was approved, pressing Mayor Scott Evans for his position. Evans, seated in the audience's front row, stood, saying, "I wholeheartedly support this."

The crowd again burst into celebration.

"I can honestly say this is one of the most exciting days this city has seen," the mayor said after the vote, also committing to sign the bill into law. "It feels great when we can set public policy that can save lives."

The decision ends an arduous battle for proponents.

City Council balked at original plans to implement a full casino smoking ban in 2007, watering down the ordinance in the face of strong gaming opposition.

The amended bill, now a year old, allowed smoking on 25 percent of casino floors, requiring gaming officials to build separately ventilated enclosed areas for smokers.

But from the start, both city and gaming officials were stumped on how to effectively implement the new plans, assuming that there would be enough volunteers willing to work in the smoke areas.

The city also did not impose a deadline for the enclosures to be built. The lack of enforcement allowed the subsequent languid pace, prompting Councilman Bruce Ward and others to push again for a full ban a year later.

Minor changes were made to Ward's proposal, but the legislation was absent any drastic changes and has maintained the satisfaction of casino workers and nonsmoking advocates.

"There's an industry out here that we have a responsibility to," said Ward, a driving force behind the legislation. "But we also have a responsibility to our visitors and our workers."

The Casino Association of New Jersey, the gaming industry's lobbying group, vigorously opposed efforts in the past to enact a casino smoking ban, warning of huge revenue losses if smokers shun Atlantic City for casinos in states where smoking is not restricted. But this time around, the association has been strangely quiet. It declined to comment Wednesday.

The association issued a brief statement weeks ago pledging to support the new law if "adequate time is permitted to comply." With time constraints in mind, the lone concession made by City Council was to make the smoking ban effective Oct. 15 instead of the 90-day deadline originally proposed.

Gaming analysts Justin T. Sebastiano, of Morgan Joseph & Co. Inc., and Robert A. LaFleur, of Susquehanna Financial Group, predicted a smoking ban would hurt business even more at a time when Atlantic City is already struggling with extra casino competition from surrounding states and higher gasoline prices that have cut into the drive-in market.

"On a somewhat positive note, Pennsylvania is currently working on a smoking ban and Connecticut is also debating a smoking ordinance in casinos," LaFleur wrote in an investment note of developments that could help the Atlantic City market.

Ban proponents see Wednesday's vote as a powerful message to other governing bodies considering similar measures to snuff smoking in casinos.

"Why would a Pennsylvania legislator subject its workers to the dangers of smoke when their neighbor just outlawed it?" asked Dr. Arnold M. Baskies, chief medical officer for the American Cancer Society of New Jersey and New York. "We hope that they'll heed the message council is sending tonight."

Although casino executives may squirm about the bill privately, it does not alter plans for most gaming halls. All but four of the city's 11 casinos had originally intended to take smoking off the gaming floor and stick to smoking lounges after the partial ban was passed last year.

Only Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort, Atlantic City Hilton Casino Resort, Trump Marina Hotel Casino and Resorts Atlantic City submitted plans to the state to allow customers to light up while gambling.

"This is a great day for the city," said City Councilman Eugene Robinson, a co-sponsor of the measure. "I want to congratulate all of you for not only being a part of history, but making it."

New Jersey banned smoking in all indoor commercial establishments except the casinos in 2006.

*Staff writer Donald Wittkowski contributed to this report.*

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