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Casino workers pleased by full-smoking ban

By Suzette Parmley

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ATLANTIC CITY - At 59, Liz String cannot climb a flight of stairs without gasping for air.

- > Last year, doctors found a nodule in her left lung.
- > She doesn't puff on cigarettes, but as a casino table-games dealer, she suffers headaches regularly because of the proliferation of smoke in her table-game pit where smoking is allowed.
- > So, yesterday's historic, unanimous approval by the Atlantic City Council for a full smoking ban in the casinos is enormously important to String.
- > "It means I'll be able to put in another 10 years in a casino," said String, a 28-year veteran of the city's casino industry. "I won't have to retire."
- > The outcome of yesterday's vote in the packed council chamber, filled mostly with casino workers and health advocates, had been expected. It follows a partial ban established a year ago and unanimous, preliminary Council approval two weeks ago of the full ban.
- > "It feels like Christmas," String said right after the vote. "This has been a hard fight that we've won. We can go to work and not come home with a headache."
- > The Casino Association of New Jersey, which represents the interests of the city's 11 casinos, declined to comment on the council's late-afternoon vote.

- > But at least one casino mogul, Donald J. Trump, whose name is emblazoned on three casinos here, said the full smoking ban would further cripple Atlantic City's struggling casino industry against new neighboring competition.
- > "It's too bad," Trump said of the vote. "It will put Atlantic City at a competitively negative advantage, and it's unfortunate."
- > The ordinance now goes before Atlantic City Mayor Scott Evans to sign.
- > Evans has stated his "wholehearted support" for the measure, which restricts smoking to nongaming lounges - similar to ones found in many U.S. airports. He has 20 days to sign the bill, which would take effect Oct. 15.
- > Some employees such as String, who work for wages that are barely above minimum wage and rely on tips for 90 percent of their income, say they often feel as though their smoky jobs are slowly killing them.
- > Kim Hesse, a dealer at Caesars, gave up smoking in 1988 and decided to lead a healthier life. But, she said, her job got in the way.
- > "Every time I went to work, it defeated my efforts," said Hesse, who started dealing at age 18, straight out of high school. "As soon as you walk into the casinos, [the smoke] would hit you like a wall.
- > "You feel like a human filter - that the casinos have no other filtration except us," she said.
- > Like many of her dealer brethren, Hesse became active in the fight for a full smoking ban about two years ago and joined forces with local health organizations, including the American Cancer Society.
- > Their cause was aided by the United Auto Workers, which stepped in on their behalf in December. The UAW has been trying to unionize all Atlantic City dealers for the last year.
- > "I felt discriminated against on top of everything else," Hesse said, referring to a smoking ban in all workplaces in New Jersey - except casinos - under the New Jersey Indoor Clean Air Act of 2006. The exemption was made after tremendous pressure from the gaming industry.
- > The \$5 billion Atlantic City casino industry has been fighting vigorously against a full smoking ban for the last year.
- > That opposition led in April 2007 to a partial smoking ban, or so-called "75-25 rule," which limited smoking to a quarter of the casino floors here.

> String, a dealer at Harrah's Resort, said the 75-25 rule made things worse, especially for dealers.

> "Now they have everybody smoking in one quarter of the casino, which is the table-games [area]," String said during a break from dealing blackjack earlier this week. "So I've got at least four times as much smoke in my face."

> String, who makes \$8 an hour plus tips, said the nature of dealers' jobs made them highly susceptible to secondhand smoke.

> "You can't get away," she said. "You're confined on a table, and you can't get away from that table."

> "You're stuck," she said.

> N.J. Joseph, 62, a table-game floor supervisor at Caesars, said trying to confine smoke to one area of a casino, regardless its size, was futile.

> "The smoke drifts to the nonsmoking areas," Joseph, a 28-year veteran, said as he worked Tuesday night in an area located 70 feet from a designated smoking section. The ceiling above his work space was a brownish color from cigarette smoke. "We don't have any special enclosures or ventilators."

> Next door in Pennsylvania, the General Assembly is considering a smoking ban with full or partial exemptions for casinos, bars and taverns.

> One health advocate, Arnold Baskies, chief medical officer for the American Cancer Society of New York and New Jersey, said he hoped yesterday's vote in Atlantic City "sends a strong message to Philadelphia and Pennsylvania to do the right thing" for its workforce and those spending their leisure time in such places.

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