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Gaming & Business

Atlantic City to ban smoking in casinos

By *Liz Benston* · April 24, 2008 · 7:25 PM

In a move that could reverberate across the casino industry, the Atlantic City Council voted unanimously Wednesday night to ban smoking in the nation's No. 2 gaming market.

Following the example of non-tribal casinos in states such as California, Colorado and Delaware that already prohibit smoking, Atlantic City casinos must go smoke-free by Oct. 15. They have the option, however, of building enclosed smoking lounges with no gaming machines or cocktail service, like those used in airports.

Under a local ordinance that took effect April 15, 2007, Atlantic City casinos, exempt from a statewide smoking ban passed the previous year, were allowed to permit smoking on up to 25 percent of their gaming floors.

Casinos had planned to build enclosed smoking lounges, some staffed with casino workers and offering gambling.

The effort to ban smoking in Atlantic City casinos began years ago with a handful of casino workers and snowballed with the help of a nonprofit support group, a 2006 lawsuit filed by a nonsmoking casino worker with lung cancer and the involvement of the United Auto Workers, a union that took up the issue as part of its campaign to unionize casino dealers.

The president of the City Council opened Wednesday's meeting with a prayer that focused on the importance of the smoking ban, said Karen Blumenfeld, policy director of New Jersey Group Against Smoking Pollution.

"That really set the tone" for the vote, Blumenfeld said.

The Atlantic City ban will put pressure on Nevada casinos to follow suit, said Stephanie Steinberg, Chair of Smoke-Free Gaming, a group pressing for smoking bans in casinos nationwide.

Steinberg said a "silent majority" of Nevada residents, casino bosses and rank-and-file workers support a smoking ban but only a small minority are willing to risk their jobs by challenging the status quo. She plans to lobby the Culinary Union, which represents a majority of casino workers on the Strip.

"This is a workplace health issue and unions have an obligation to advocate for policies and laws protecting their workers," she said.

Gaming companies have opposed smoking bans, fearing that customers who smoke will go elsewhere. In the face of such threats, some have upgraded ventilation systems that have drawn critics who say they don't do enough to remove carcinogens from the air.

Whether smoking bans hurt casino revenue over the long term is hotly debated. While there is some evidence that gamblers don't play as long if they can't smoke, there also is evidence that some casinos increased revenue even after smoking bans were implemented.