

Smokers take last drags as casinos crack down

Atlantic City – Kathy Abbatelli says she has to smoke outside when she's at home to steer clear of her non-smoking husband. Here at Caesars, where she leisurely slips coins into a slot machine, she can smoke with abandon.

It's a privilege she doesn't want to lose, but the days may be dwindling for one of the last holdouts for unfettered smokers' rights: casinos.

Next month, Atlantic City will make smoking off-limits on 75% of the gambling floor in each of its 11 casinos. The casinos are currently excluded from a 2006 statewide smoking ban in bars, restaurants and other workplaces. Legislation for an outright ban is working its way through the New Jersey Legislature.

„You feel like a criminal, as it is when you smoke,“ says Abbatelli, 58, who leaves her home in Williamstown, N.J., to come to Atlantic City every two weeks. „This is one of the few places where I can enjoy it.“

To some, puffing on a cigarette while gambling is like munching on a hot dog at a baseball game, comfortable habits that go hand in hand. Smoking bans in workplaces or public spaces exist in 21 states, and now casinos are starting to stamp out smoking, too.

„In the evolution of protecting the public from secondhand smoke, this seems to be the last bastion,“ says New Jersey state Sen. Joe Vitale, a Democrat who is sponsoring the proposed bill. „Someone has to go first, and if New Jersey does, I think it will give other casinos and other states the comfort level“ to ban smoking in casinos.

Some already are taking action.

Colorado's House of Representatives voted Feb. 28 to include casinos in an existing ban on smoking in bingo halls, dog tracks and most other indoor venues. State Rep. Anne McGihon, sponsor of the bill, says the Senate also is expected to pass the measure, which would take effect July 1. „We brought this bill to level the playing field for all businesses,“ the Democrat says.

Rhode Island state Rep. Amy Rice, a Democrat, introduced a bill on March 1 to end a smoking ban exemption for gambling venues.

Bill's Casino Lake Tahoe in Stateline, Nev., went smoke-free in December, and the Tropicana Atlantic City casino is considering it

Lawmakers in Pennsylvania and Illinois are including casinos in proposed legislation to ban smoking.

„If we start (exempting) casinos, we'll have to do off-track betting, then we'll have to do other avenues of exemptions,“ says state Sen. Terry Link, an Illinois Democrat. His bill to ban smoking in all public indoor spaces, including casinos, was approved by the Senate executive committee last Wednesday.

Driving customers away?

Commercial casinos, which generated \$ 30 billion in gambling revenue in 2005, are concerned that smoking bans could drive patrons to states where they can smoke or to tribal casinos not subject to local laws.

„A complete ban on smoking in the city's casinos would dramatically affect our ability to retain our customers who smoke, as well as to compete with casinos in other jurisdictions that permit smoking,“ says Joseph Corbo, president of the Casino Association of New Jersey.

A study by a former gambling industry professor at the University of Louisville examined the impact of a 2002 smoking ban in Delaware. It found that there was an average 15% decrease in betting at gambling venues.

„I would expect that casino revenue would decline in Atlantic City if a smoking ban were imposed there,“ researcher Richard Thalheimer says.

Others say preserving profits does not justify jeopardizing workers' health.

„It's greed,“ says Vince Rennich, 49, a table game supervisor who worked at the Tropicana Atlantic City for 26 years before being laid off this month. „They have an obligation to provide a safe work environment.“

Rennich, a non-smoker, had part of his lung removed after doctors discovered two years ago that he has lung cancer. He has filed a lawsuit against his former workplace.

Jennifer Guillermain, 42, a game supervisor at Caesars, also hopes lawmakers will end smoking in her workplace. „I can't go from one part of the house to another without being winded,“ she says of the smoky environment's effect.

Concerned about competition

Atlantic City Councilman G. Bruce Ward proposed banning smoking in all workplaces, including casinos. Ward says that pressure from the casino industry led the council to compromise, requiring casinos by April 15 to create a smoking section no bigger than 25% of the gambling floor.

Nevadans passed a ballot initiative banning smoking from most indoor workplaces, but not casinos.

„I think part of the attraction of a destination like Las Vegas to the adult market is the freedom to enjoy cocktails, to enjoy smoking,“ said Cara Roberts, spokeswoman for the Las

Vegas Chamber of Commerce. „It’s a business, so if consumers don’t want smoking and make economic decisions based on that, businesses will respond.“

John Packer of Bill’s Casino Lake Tahoe in Nevada, which proclaims itself the area’s only smoke-free casino, says their smoking ban was part of a strategy to distinguish the venue from adjacent casinos, which allow smoking.

„It’s finding a niche,“ Packer says.

Fred Buro, president of The Tropicana Atlantic City, says he is concerned about competition from states that allow smoking. But „we think ultimately everybody will end up in the long run, and maybe the short run, smoke-free.“