

Don't delay smoking ban

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New Jersey casinos were supposed to go smoke-free next week, but casino executives, citing a downturn in business that a ban might worsen, want a delay. They should not get it.

Experience should have buried the arguments against smoking bans by now. Yet the Atlantic City municipal council today will consider delaying an ordinance that would stop all smoking on casino floors on Oct. 15, limiting those who want to light up to enclosed, unstaffed lounges.

Casino traffic and revenues have been on a downward slide for two years. High gas prices and competition from newer gambling venues in nearby states have hurt Atlantic City's bottom line. The economic crisis and the accompanying credit crunch will no doubt mean new challenges for the casinos.

The smoking ban, however, was prescribed by the municipal government to protect hundreds of casino workers who spend shift after shift breathing in clouds of toxic air. The casino workers have been among the most exposed and least protected employees. New Jersey has already halted smoking in other public places and work spaces, including restaurants and bars, to protect workers and patrons from the dangers of secondhand smoke.

None of those places saw the decline in patronage that the casinos are predicting. Neither has the entertainment industry in New York City, which enacted a comprehensive smoking ban five years ago. There is no reason to expect anything different in Atlantic City.

The public, including smokers, has grown used to the blessing of cleaner air almost everywhere. Although smoking is allowed at New York casinos run by Native American groups, it is not permitted at the New York slot spots and is restricted at the Philadelphia parlors that are the big competition for New Jersey's casinos.

In the meantime, New Jersey's state psychiatric hospitals are preparing to go smoke-free everywhere on their grounds, not just inside. Private hospitals in the state are working with the American Cancer Society to do the same. The rest of the state and much of the country have moved past the point on which the Atlantic City casinos are still stuck.

Atlantic City bravely enacted a local ordinance to protect casino employees and those patrons who choose not to smoke against the minority who do. It shouldn't cave in now.