

November 16, 2008

Gamblers light up as ban ends today

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Marc Dempsey and Donna Nobile huddled in the chilly air Wednesday night enjoying a cigarette just outside the Tropicana's Pacific Avenue entrance.

It's the kind of drill the Saddle Brook couple are so used to since New Jersey went smoke free, they don't bat an eyelash.

"It's second nature," Dempsey said.

So much so, the couple expressed surprise that the short-lived full smoking ban on the casino floor will come to an end today.

In April of this year, the City Council enacted a total smoking ban on the gambling floor of all 11 casinos. It was cheered by many casino workers worried about their health, as well as by anti-smoking groups.

But casino operators and many gamblers who smoke decried the ban, saying it would drive customers away in droves.

In the interim, the financial meltdown rocked the economy and led to even steeper declines at the casinos, which have laid off hundreds of workers since the year began. The council changed its mind and agreed to repeal the smoking ban for at least a year.

But because it did so at the last moment, it could not legally stop the ban from taking effect on Oct. 15. Ashtrays were collected and stacked up in casino corners, "no smoking" signs went up atop slot machines, and walled-off smoking lounges opened in nine of the 11 casinos.

Many casino employees said it was a joy not to have gamblers blow smoke in their faces, not to experience the burning eyes, stinging throats and smelly clothes that come with working in smoking areas.

But many smokers were put off, and vowed to take their money elsewhere if the ban continued.

The ban will end today, and the situation will again revert to what it was before, where smoking is restricted to no more than 25 percent of the gambling floor. The situation will be reviewed in a year to see if the economy has improved enough to put a total ban back in place.

"It'll be nice to be able to sit at a table and smoke," Dempsey, 31, said.

Still, Dempsey does feel for the dealers who have to endure the smoke. And truth be told, he'd still visit Atlantic City if the full ban remained in effect, something anti-smoking advocates have claimed

all along.

Yet the numbers for the last two weeks of October belie that, casino officials say.

For the first 15 days of the month, when smoking was still allowed, slot revenues were down 12 percent at Harrah's four casinos. For the second 15 days, when a total smoking ban was in place, slot revenues plunged 20 percent, according to J. Carlos Tolosa, eastern division president of Harrah's Entertainment Inc.

Other casinos reported similar declines. So far this year, the casinos have won \$3.9 billion, down 6.6 percent from the same period last year. This year will be the second in a row that revenues have declined in Atlantic City, after 28 years of consecutive increases.

The industry sought a one year delay to the full ban to offset the economic swoon currently plaguing not only Atlantic City, but most gaming resorts around the country.

Perhaps the only sign of positive growth is found in Pennsylvania slot parlors where smoking is still allowed on 25 percent of the casino floor, the same percentage as Atlantic City.

Since Pennsylvania gaming has come on line at the end of 2006, revenues in Atlantic City have tumbled.

"The smoking ban had a significant impact on revenues at a time when the industry is struggling with a number of uncontrollable issues and we are glad to have to worry about one less negative impact on our business," said Mark Juliano, CEO of Trump Entertainment Resorts, Inc. "At least now we're back on an even playing field."

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