

Revel considers adding smoking section to casino floor

By HOA NGUYEN Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, April 14, 2013 3:00 am

Revel bankruptcy documents say the Atlantic City megaresort intends to add a smoking section as part of its restructuring changes, but there are indications officials haven't made a definitive decision.

The resort has not submitted plans showing how it would add a designated smoking area to the casino floor — blueprint submissions are required of any property prior to adding a smoking section, according to the Atlantic City Health Department. Under the city's health codes, a casino can add smoking areas, but the space must encompass no more than 25 percent of the gambling floor.

Jeffrey Hartmann, Revel's interim CEO, was not made available for an interview on the topic. However, he issued a statement in response to inquiries from The Press of Atlantic City saying the resort was “weighing the benefits.”

“As we evaluate our business model and look for ways to improve the long-term viability of Revel, we are carefully weighing the benefits of and how best to introduce a designated smoking area within the casino,” he said. “We aim to provide a wide array of amenities in order to cater to our guests' varying preferences, and a designated smoking area could further add to this offering.”

The decision to add a smoking area is a difficult one because Revel, which was built on a model that promotes healthy living, stands to alienate patrons drawn to the resort for its smoke-free environment, some observers said.

“You would have to weigh the upside with the potential loss you might experience from visitors who want a resort experience that is smoke-free,” said Israel Posner, executive director of the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism at Richard Stockton College.

A survey published last year by Stockton indicated that high-spending, smoking gamblers — particularly those taking day trips rather than vacations — were less likely to visit a smoke-free resort.

But the Stockton survey also showed that more people are attracted to a resort that is smoke-free, Posner said. Nonsmokers — about 80 percent of the adult population — also outnumber smokers.

Another challenge to adding a smoking area to Revel has to do with the open design of its casino floor, Posner said.

“It's very difficult to confine that smoke to one area,” he said. “It's difficult in every casino in town, but I think it's particularly difficult in a place like Revel.”

Flip-flopping on a smoking policy also carries perception risks, said Joe Weinert, senior vice president of Spectrum Gaming Group in Linwood.

“It was a risk going smoke-free to begin with, and there’s a risk to backtracking on all of that,” he said. “I don’t know if there is an easy answer.”

Rather than changing its policy, Revel should consider heavily publicizing its smoke-free environment, promoting it through advertising and marketing, a tactic similar resorts have marketed to their advantage, said Karen Blumenfeld, executive director of Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy in Summit, Union County.

“There are ways to market they have 100 percent smoke-free that they have never tried,” she said of Revel. “Having smoking be the scapegoat as to why they are underperforming makes no sense.”

Blumenfeld cited the smoke-free policy at Marriott Hotels, which she said the chain heavily promotes.

Many casinos in other states are smoke-free, such as in Delaware and New York. When casinos open in Massachusetts sometime in the next few years, they also will be smoke-free.

But casinos in Pennsylvania and Nevada allow smoking, and Atlantic City has historically been a part of that group, observers said. There is an expectation among smokers, said Robert Macc, 44, of New York City, who was smoking outside Revel last week.

“That’s why we go to A.C. and Las Vegas,” he said.

Macc said that he prefers nonsmoking environments but that he also doesn’t want to ride down the escalators and out the door to light up. Having a small designated area may be a good compromise, he said.

Another Revel patron, Dorothy Francione, 70, of Delaware, who was in Atlantic City to visit her sister, said she quit smoking 13 years ago and tries to avoid placing herself in smoking areas. But Francione said that if it helps bring gamblers to Revel, the casino should add a smoking area. She would just avoid the smoking areas if necessary.

“I think they should add smoking,” she said. “If you don’t like it, you keep away.”

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