



## **To smoke or not to smoke at casinos? That is not the question at G2E**

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Not found among the list of discussion topics being covered during the Global Gaming Expo is the idea of a casinowide smoking ban.

It's an issue the gaming industry can't avoid. There are more nonsmoking commercial casino states (18) than casino states that allow smoking (six). The smoking states — Nevada, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Indiana, Louisiana and Mississippi — are the nation's largest commercial gaming revenue producers.

Times, however, are changing.

In Atlantic City, 75 percent of the casino floors are nonsmoking. Casinos in the newest commercial gaming states — Ohio, Maryland and Massachusetts — all opened as nonsmoking facilities. In Nevada, restaurants, entertainment venues, indoor retail areas and other nongaming attractions prohibit smoking. Newer casinos use technology that cleans and filters indoor air at increased rates.

However, many gaming customers don't want to gamble in a smoking environment. Casino employees don't want to inhale second-hand smoke.

Ignoring the subject won't make it go away.

G2E, the world's largest gaming trade show and conference, is the perfect venue for this topic. Instead, the extent of the debate will be Smoke-Free Gaming of America's informational picket line in front of the Sands Expo and Convention Center starting Monday.

American Gaming Association CEO Geoff Freeman, whose Washington, D.C.-based trade organization produces G2E, said he's discussed smoking bans with casino industry leaders.

"The primary concern the industry has is how it would be accomplished," Freeman said.

An equitable solution is the underlying worry. States can ban smoking, and commercial casinos would have to comply with the law. But American Indian casinos, which operate on federally recognized sovereign land, are exempt.

For example, despite California having some of the nation's most stringent nonsmoking laws, Indian casinos allow smoking, while the state's card rooms and racetracks fall under the ban.

"You could have two casinos next door to each other, one nonsmoking and one that allows smoking," said Indian gaming consultant Victor Rocha, a member of California's Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, which owns the Pechanga Casino in Temecula.

Florida bans smoking at its race track casinos and jai-alai facilities, but the seven casinos operated by the Seminole Indian Tribe, including the Hard Rock properties in Hollywood and Tampa, all allow smoking.

"The casino environment is only getting more competitive," Freeman said. "At the same time, we have to balance how to create a safe and healthy work place."

Analysts believe smoking bans result in up to a 10 percent decline in annual gaming revenue, though recent events may foretell the future.

Macau, the world's largest gambling market based on revenue, implemented a partial smoking ban in casinos last year and may authorize a full scale ban next year.

New Orleans is the industry's wake-up call.

Orleans Parish officials banned smoking in public buildings in April, making Harrah's New Orleans the state's only smoke-free casino. Caesars Entertainment Corp., which owns the property, said the ban contributed to gaming revenue declines of 16 percent in May and 31 percent in June. In July, Harrah's New Orleans gaming revenue rose 26 percent.

Two other New Orleans-area casinos are not part of the smoking ban because they are in Jefferson Parish. Operators said they hadn't seen any increase in business from displaced smoking customers.

Harrah's New Orleans now embraces the ban. The property welcomes guests to the "best smoke-free casino in the south," and outdoor smoking patios are under development.

In August, Harrah's New Orleans casino revenue declined 17 percent, but other factors, such as a fewer weekend days, were to blame for the drop.

John Schachter, director of state communications for the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, said more time is needed to understand any economic impact from smoking bans.

"We do know what the health impact is already, and that's the real issue at stake," he said. "We're talking about the health of the city's workers and visitors, who are benefiting from the law thanks to their newfound ability to breathe cleaner air."

The Fernley Nugget in Lyon County is Nevada's only voluntary smoke-free casino. On the Strip, most casinos ban smoking in their poker rooms and some race and sports books.

Nevada voters banned smoking in all public places in 2006, but casino floors were exempted. The ban was amended in 2011 to allow smoking in taverns where customers are 21 and older or the smoking areas are walled off from the restaurants.

Banning smoking in casinos where the activity has long been allowed is not simple. In Las Vegas, it would need to be implemented in phases. A plan to eliminate smoking in casinos nationwide — including Indian casinos — needs to be discussed. Casino operators owe it to their customers and their employees.

Howard Stutz's Inside Gaming column appears Wednesdays and Sundays.

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