

# Atlantic City passes limited casino smoking ban

Atlantic City, New Jersey (AP) – Smokers will still be able to light up in New Jersey's 11 casinos, but they'll have a lot less room in which to do it after the City Council passed a compromise law Wednesday night restricting – but not banning – smoking on the gambling floor.

The measure bars smoking on 75 percent of a casino floor, and requires gambling halls to set aside 25 percent of the floor space as smoking areas by April 15. It was passed by a 6-3 vote just before 7:30 p.m., after the council heard more than two hours of comment on the proposal.

The council had been poised to enact a law that would have made New Jersey the largest gambling area in the nation to totally ban smoking, but it backed down under extreme pressure from the casino industry, which feared the loss of 20 percent of its revenue and 3,400 jobs.

„I think it really stinks – it literally stinks,“ said Rona Bavuso, a cocktail waitress at Harrah's Atlantic City who says she has suffered ill health effects for years from breathing in second-hand smoke. „Every other restaurant, every other business, every other public place in New Jersey gets to breathe clean air except us.“

Casinos were exempted by a smoking ban the state legislature passed last April.

„I think we should have the same rights as everyone else,“ said Helen Turano, a floor supervisor at the Claridge Casino. „We give up a lot to work here: Every Christmas, every Easter, every Thanksgiving. We shouldn't have to give up our health, too.“

Joseph Corbo Jr., president of the Casino Association of New Jersey, said the compromise is one the casinos can live with because it imposes less of an economic hardship on them.

He said it is now up to individual casinos to determine „how each can best comply with the ordinance in a manner that allows our casinos to continue to offer gaming opportunities to our many customers who smoke that also addresses the concerns of our valued employees.“

One of the most emotional pleas came from a second grader, Bria Lamonica of Turnersville, who told the council her grandmother died from lung cancer related to smoking.

„I don't want my Poppy to die from other people smoking,“ she said. „He visits the casinos frequently.“

Anti-smoking groups vowed to continue their fight to rid casinos of smoke.

„This is not an employee protection act,“ said Regina Carlson, executive director of the New Jersey Group Against Smoking Pollution (GASP). „Frankly, right now, it looks like a casino protection act.“

Her group was among a coalition of clean-air advocates that ran a series of radio commercials over the weekend urging people to call the council and demand that it return to its original proposal to eliminate all smoking on casino floors.

The ads featured Vince Rennich, a 25-year table games supervisor at the Tropicana Casino and Resort who blames the lung cancer he developed in 2005 on secondhand smoke from casino patrons.

„They're going to do what they're going to do, but we're not going to stop, either,“ he said.

The casino industry indicated it would accept the compromise. However, the switch left many casino workers and anti-smoking

groups feeling betrayed.

„It is unconscionable for the council members to have pulled the rug out from under these hardworking casino employees,“ said Tom Duffy, executive vice president of the American Cancer Society’s eastern division.

Proponents say the smoking areas would be walled off from floor to ceiling, and equipped with powerful ventilation systems to suck smoke out of the air and carry it out of the building.

But GASP released a survey this week of gambling halls in Rhode Island that employ a similar partition system, casting doubt on its effectiveness. The study found that restricting smoking to 25 percent of the gambling floor made conditions there much worse, while not significantly improving the air in nonsmoking areas.

Companies with stakes in the Atlantic City casino smoking ban include Columbia Entertainment, Harrah’s Entertainment, Boyd Gaming Corp., MGM Mirage and Trump Entertainment Resorts.