

Gaming board approves poker, blackjack machines at state's casinos

Harrisburg – Casinos in Pennsylvania aren't allowed to have actual table games like blackjack and poker, but they could soon be bringing in a close substitute.

The state Gaming Control Board has decided to allow casinos to offer an electronic table game called Table Master, which doesn't have a human dealer but is configured to simulate table games.

With Table Master, up to five can play at one time. They sit at separate seats before a large, flat-screen TV, which pictures a virtual poker or blackjack dealer, who „deals“ virtual cards to each of the five positions. The electronic video dealers can also be programmed to speak, saying such things as „Come play with me.“

Each player competes individually against the virtual dealer. One individual's play doesn't affect anyone else's odds or outcome, said board spokesman Doug Harbach.

A blackjack player sitting at one seat could receive an ace of spades and a jack of hearts from the virtual dealer, and at the same time the player next to him could receive the exact same cards, he said. All or none of the five players could win on a given hand.

„The board felt these machines will provide another strong entertainment value, one that will produce more revenue“ for the state, he said. The state taxes slot machine revenue at a rate of 55 percent, and will use much of that revenue to lower property taxes, but not before July 2008.

Philadelphia Park racetrack/casino in Bucks County has ordered 16 of the electronic table games, which patrons will be able to play starting May 5.

„Adding these electronic games will make us more of a full-service casino,“ Darlene Monzo, vice president for marketing, said yesterday.

Besides each betting position being independently connected to the virtual dealer, each position also is independently connected to the state’s central accounting computer in Harrisburg, just as all the slot machines in a casino are connected to it. One Table Master, with its five positions, counts as five slot machines, Mr. Harbach said.

Each of the four existing Pennsylvania racetrack/casinos have about 1,500 to 2,000 slot machines now, but they can have up to 5,000 each. The state’s central computer system makes sure no one is tampering with a gaming device and ensures the state is getting its full 55 percent cut of the revenue.

Mr. Harbach said the board’s gaming laboratory has been working for several months with Shuffle Master of Las Vegas, which makes the electronic table game, to make sure it complies with the 2004 Pennsylvania slots law. That law banned actual table games, which have a human dealer.

Table Master is legal because the odds are random and one player’s decisions on his „cards“ don’t affect any of the other players, Mr. Harbach said.

Besides Philadelphia Park, other Pennsylvania racetrack/casinos, as well as The Meadows casino, which will open in May, are expected to consider having electronic table games. Free-standing casinos also will be eligible to use the machines.

The addition of these „is not good news for Atlantic City casinos,“ whose revenues are already being hurt by

Philadelphia Park and the new Harrah's Chester Downs in Delaware County, said Joseph Weinert of Gaming Industry Observer, which tracks the gaming industry.

While electronic table games „do not replicate the experience of live table games, they nevertheless will prove to be a suitable alternative for some players who would otherwise make the longer drive to Atlantic City,“ Mr. Weinert said.

Pennsylvania gaming officials also hope the new electronic table games will help the state better compete against West Virginia and Delaware. Delaware added electronic table games last fall for its slots parlors. West Virginia recently legalized both electronic and regular table games for its four slots casinos, but they must still be approved in referendums in the counties where the casinos are located.