

Senate votes to ban smoking in Atlantic City casinos

Trenton, New Jersey – More than a year after New Jersey's wide-reaching public smoking ban went into effect, the state Senate voted Thursday to close its biggest loophole, which allows smoking in Atlantic City's casinos.

The Senate voted 35-0 to eliminate the exemption that allows gamblers to light up in casinos and horse race simulcasting facilities. The Assembly has yet to consider the bill.

New Jersey's Smoke-Free Air Act of 2006 bars cigarette, pipe and cigar smoking in most indoor places in the state, including shopping malls, office buildings, restaurants and bars.

„When we approved the Smoke-Free Air Act last session, we were told that adding casinos to the smoking ban would hurt the industry,“ said Sen. Shirley Turner, a co-sponsor of the wider-ranging bill. „However, as we've seen, the smoking ban in practice in New Jersey restaurants and bars, while it's taken some adjustment ... hasn't meant the end of the world.“

If the law is revised to include casinos and race tracks, the only exemptions would be cigar bars, tobacco shops and private homes.

The Atlantic City Council in February adopted a citywide smoking ban, which requires at least 75 percent of a casino floor to be smoke-free. That law went into effect in April.

The city's 11 casinos complied in different ways, with at least five creating nongambling smoking lounges, where patrons can go to light up and then return to the tables or slots. Others decided to wall off sections of their casinos to allow some patrons to smoke while gambling.

Bill co-sponsor Sen. Joseph Vitale remained unsatisfied with the partial ban.

„Local efforts to control smoking in casinos have only shifted the problem from one area of the casino floor to another,“ said Vitale. „If we’re serious about putting the health of New Jerseyans first, we simply cannot accept a smoking ban that provides loopholes for casinos.“

Another anti-smoking measure also advanced Thursday.

The Senate approved a proposal that would make it illegal to smoke in cars in which children are riding. That bill, sponsored by Sen. Ray Lesniak, passed 27-2. It has yet to be introduced in the Assembly.