

Electronic table games coming to Atlantic City

Atlantic City – New Jersey gaming regulators Wednesday approved a new form of electronic gambling to help Atlantic City's casinos counter extra competition from slot parlors in surrounding states.

The new regulations allow for live testing of electronic versions of poker and roulette, a key step before the games are introduced to gamblers in the casino hotels.

Although the regulations have been given preliminary approval by the state Casino Control Commission, it is not yet known when live testing will begin and which casinos will offer the electronic table games.

Regulators noted that electronic games will broaden Atlantic City's appeal to gamblers at a time when slot parlors in Pennsylvania and Delaware continue to steal customers from the resort's USD 5.2 billion gambling industry.

"I think it adds a new element to the Atlantic City market and is particularly important because Pennsylvania and Delaware have them," Casino Control Commission Chair Linda M. Kassekert said of the growing popularity of electronic games.

Three of Pennsylvania's five slot parlors offer electronic blackjack games that mimic the live version of blackjack in Atlantic City. Life-like video "dealers" in the electronic games perform the same functions as their human counterparts in live blackjack.

In Delaware, gamblers can play electronic versions of blackjack, poker, baccarat and Let It Ride.

Currently, casino gambling in Pennsylvania and Delaware is limited to slot machines. The electronic table games

technically are modified slot machines whose computer software has been programmed to comply with the slots-only laws in those states.

Daniel Heneghan, a spokesman for the Casino Control Commission, said the electronic poker and roulette games planned for Atlantic City are totally different than what is offered in Pennsylvania and Delaware.

Up to this point, Atlantic City's games have only been tested in a laboratory operated by the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement. The commission's approval of the new regulations sets the stage for full-fledged testing on the casino floor.

In electronic poker, gamblers sit at a poker table, but their cards appear on a video screen instead of being dealt to them by a live dealer. The electronic version of roulette features a real roulette table and human dealers, but the wagering and payouts are done electronically, Heneghan said.

Gaming analyst Dennis M. Farrell Jr. of Wachovia Capital Markets said gamblers prefer live table games, but the electronic versions will help casinos hold down their labor costs. However, he predicted the casinos will offer only a small number of electronic games in the beginning to test their popularity.

"I think Atlantic City will always have live table games. It's a competitive advantage over Pennsylvania, Delaware and New York," Farrell said. "But over time, electronic games will slowly grow. It's just a question of acceptance by the public."

The introduction of electronic games coincides with efforts by the United Auto Workers to unionize Atlantic City's table game dealers. The UAW has won union elections at Bally's, Caesars and Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino, but lost at Trump Marina Hotel Casino and the Atlantic City Hilton Casino Resort.

Kassekert said the commission's approval of electronic

gambling “has nothing to do” with the UAW union drive.

“We’re approving them because I think they’re a very important product for Atlantic City,” she said. “It’s something we’ve been working through for a long time.”