

Chips fall for gamblers when Emerald closes

At midnight Saturday, the glazed glass doors of Saskatoon's Emerald Casino will slide shut on gamers for good, putting an end to patrons' routines, which sometimes stretch back decades.

The Emerald is closing after the provincial government, which wanted just one casino in the Saskatoon area, struck a deal to compensate Prairieland Park with revenues from the new Dakota Dunes casino. The new CAD 61-million facility is set to open Aug. 10 on the Whitecap Dakota First Nation 30 kilometres south of Saskatoon.

Some patrons say the closure of the Emerald will bring their gambling to a halt.

„It's a bad thing because we won't have any place to go now,“ says Phillip Boulos, who's been coming to Emerald for more than a decade.

He lives in the city's north end, and the prospect of driving for another half hour to gamble doesn't appeal to him. He might head out to Dakota Dunes „once in a blue moon.“

„It's a long way, so I don't have too much time to play,“ Boulos said. „I work 15 hours a day. There's no time left.“

Emerald customer Tim, 21, who didn't want to give his last name, came to the casino three times a week.

„I'm actually probably going to stop going to the casino altogether because it's too much of an inconvenience to go out there (to Dakota),“ he said. „I don't feel like driving 20 minutes just to lose money.“

Rick, a trucker from Manitoba who also didn't want to give his

last name, says he won't be making his way out to Dakota Dunes either, even though he comes to the Emerald twice a week. The location was great for killing time, because he makes deliveries just around the corner from the casino, he said.

„I'll sleep more,“ he said with a smile, adding the Emerald's closure will likely save him CAD100,000 a year.

„I'm just sorry to see the people go,“ he said. „I hope (the workers) find a place.“

Meanwhile, other patrons are looking forward to the opening of the province's glitzy new casino.

„It's too bad we didn't get one in town,“ said Eugene Bokshowan, a 75-year-old who comes to Emerald a couple of times a month.

Although about 165 jobs are eliminated along with the Emerald, Bokshowan is pleased to see Dakota Dunes will create 442 new positions.

He's looking forward to visiting the province's newest and biggest casino on the Whitecap reserve.

„Compared to other casinos all over the country and all over the world, we were shortchanged here,“ he said of the Emerald.

Richard Kilburn, who occasionally golfs at Dakota Dunes, said the city's only casino moving out of town won't likely change his gambling patterns. Still, he thinks the new facility should have been in Saskatoon.

„It's a good draw for the city,“ he said. „I think some of the negatives that were brought up by special interest groups, they had their own agenda. It had nothing to do with gambling or development of the city.“

For now, the Emerald will stay open for some patrons who bet on off-track horse racing and watch the races on TV, as well

as diners at the restaurant.

For Brien, 61, who didn't want to give his last name, the disappearance of slots and table games at Emerald is a small inconvenience. He comes to bet on horses about five days a week, he says, and used the games to kill time between races.

Bill Mazurkewich comes to the Emerald twice a year to buy five decks of used cards for CAD 1 each, which he uses in recreational card games. He's not sure where he'll get his cards now, but agrees with other patrons the facility should have been located in Saskatoon.

„We'd get money,“ he said of lost tax revenue. „This way, we get nothing – and yet we have to turn around and build a highway.“