

Native casino to go smoke-free in exchange for more slots

A native-owned casino north of Winnipeg is going smoke-free as part of a deal that will see it double its stable of slot machines and share more money with northern reserves.

The expansion project at the South Beach Casino, located on the Brokenhead Ojibway Nation near Grand Beach, will increase the number of gaming devices to 600, up from 300.

The smoking ban will go into effect almost immediately and the new machines are expected sometime this fall.

As part of the expansion plan, they will voluntarily become smoke-free, officials with the casino, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the province announced Friday.

The casino will also share some profits of the new machines with more than a dozen northern First Nations, said Dave Chomiak, minister responsible for the Manitoba Gaming Control Commission.

„A lot of them are remote and don't have the opportunity, for example, to have people from their communities employed in a casino, so this is in some ways a way to provide economic development in those communities,“ he said.

Smoking is currently banned at non-native casinos in Manitoba, and some have suggested the native casino's popularity was based in part on its ability to allow patrons to smoke.

Furlon Barker, chair of South Beach Casino Inc., said agreeing to a smoking ban was a price aboriginal leaders had to pay to expand.

„It's always being held for ransom ... because we are not the ones who have the yes-or-no decision-making advantage,“ he said.

„I would have preferred if we would have said, ‚We want to go smoke-free because we're very concerned about the health of our First Nations people and the rest of our customers,‘ instead of making a decision based on something that's put in front of you as ‚take it or leave it.‘“

Conservative gaming critic Ron Schuler said the province should have put the expansion on hold until a market study on the feasibility of more native gaming is complete, the results of which are expected to be released in the fall.

The casino, which opened in 2005, recently celebrated its millionth visitor. A planned resort and conference centre is also expected to open on the site in the fall of 2008.