

# Casino forced to reveal details on big spenders

Auckland's SkyCity Casino has been forced to tighten controls on potential problem gamblers in a move which the Problem Gambling Foundation says should cut the casino's profits.

SkyCity, the country's fifth-biggest listed company, invited bids for the company in September after its net profit dropped 18 per cent to NZD 98 million in the year to June, but failed to find a buyer before its annual meeting last week.

Problem Gambling Foundation chief executive John Stansfield said its new responsible gambling programme, made public last week by the Gambling Commission, should cut profits further.

„If I was entertaining buying SkyCity, it's something I'd read very carefully," he said. „If they are relying to an unacceptable degree on people with gambling problems, and we solve that, then you reduce revenue without reducing costs."

SkyCity's general manager corporate, Alistair Ryan, said the company did not expect a major effect on profits because fewer than 2 per cent of Sky City's customers were problem gamblers, and possibly about the same proportion of its revenue came from such gamblers.

He said the company had written the first draft of its new responsible gambling programme and accepted the changes made by the Gambling Commission.

The Gambling Commission decision described the new programme, which takes effect on Monday, as setting „a new standard compared with existing programmes in New Zealand and probably Australia".

The main changes are:

- Visiting the casino at least five times a week and spending more than NZD 300 on pokie machines per session, or visiting at least twice a week and spending at least NZD 500 a session, will be counted as indicators of potential problem gambling.
- Loyalty card holders will be able to request figures on how much they have lost at the casino.
- „Veiled disclosures“, such as calls from family and friends looking for missing individuals, will have to be recorded.
- Anyone identified as a problem gambler will have to be excluded unless the casino considers that the person can continue to gamble without harm.
- All loan transactions by third parties for financial gain at the casino will be banned.

The Gambling Commission said SkyCity resisted including data on frequency of visits and spending per session as „strong“ indicators of potential gambling problems.

It agreed in the end to accept these as „general indicators“, while „strong indicators“ were limited to „severe emotional distress“, self-identification and „veiled or forthright third-party disclosures“.

It has also given notice that, by the time of the next review of the programme, in three years, SkyCity will have to be able to give customers without loyalty cards information on their gambling activity and losses.

Mr Stansfield said the new programme did not have everything he wanted „but it’s a substantial move up to the plate“.

„When you put frequency and duration and spend together, you can begin to identify problem gamblers,“ he said.

„The powerful thing the commission has said is that you must give people information which is there from their customer loyalty cards. They don’t do that.“

He said the only way for the casino to meet the requirement to give such information to all its customers was to issue cards to all customers – a system recently introduced in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan.

Mr Ryan said 30,000 Auckland casino customers had loyalty cards, which were available on request.

They accounted for about 30 per cent of the 16,000 people who visited the casino on an average day.

He said Canadian casinos were government-run and New Zealand needed to be mindful of gamblers' privacy.