

Sands' ferry service temporarily suspended in Macau

Las Vegas casino mogul Sheldon Adelson's new ferry service to the southern Chinese gambling enclave of Macau was suspended this week, dealing a setback to his plans to turn the once sleepy backwater into a top vacation resort.

The CotaiJet service, which began running on November 30 and operates between Hong Kong's Macao Ferry Terminal at Shun Tak Centre and Macao's newly opened Taipa Temporary Ferry Terminal, temporarily suspended service effective 10 am on Tuesday, December 11.

Macau's Intermediate Court issued the injunction Monday, temporarily grounding Cotai Waterjets, controlled by Adelson's Las Vegas Sands Corp., less than two weeks after they started plying the busy waterway between Hong Kong and Macau, while the court reviews a legal challenge to the Macao government's decision which granted CotaiJet a concession to operate ferry service between Hong Kong and Macao.

The court order follows an appeal by rival operator Hong Kong North West Express against the Macao government's decision to award the ferry license without an open tender. The government had defended its decision saying the ferry would help enhance Macau's position as a top vacation hub. The court, however, disagreed, temporarily suspending Cotai Waterjets and allowing Hong Kong North West Express to push on with its appeal. Cotai Waterjets said it was aware of the ruling and would release a statement later.

Hong Kong North West Express had applied several times to Macau authorities since last June for a license to run a ferry between Hong Kong and Macau, but had been turned down, the

ferry operator's general manager Alan Liu said. Liu questioned why the government handed Cotai Waterjets the license when it had no experience running ferries, while his company was already in the business.

The new Cotai ferry service was launched November 30 as part of Adelson's plan to improve transport links between Hong Kong and Cotai, a strip of reclaimed land on which Adelson has built his massive Venetian Macao casino resort-hotel. Competitor Melco PBL is also building the City of Dreams resort on Cotai.

Macau's current ferry terminal is located on its mainland peninsula linked to China, while the new CotaiJet service is based at a temporary terminal located near the reclaimed Cotai strip. The new ferry service offered 20 daily trips on high-speed catamaran vessels to and from Macau, according to its Web site.

„We are confident the Macao court system will act prudently and expeditiously and that the results will serve in the best interests of the residents and visitors of Macao, Hong Kong, and the wider Pearl River Delta region,“ said Stephen Weaver, president of Asian Region, Las Vegas Sands Corp.

Weaver said that since the service has only been operating for a week and a half its temporary suspension would not significantly impact visitation to Macao or the company's Venetian Macao Resort Hotel, which opened in August and has averaged more than 60,000 visitors per day on weekdays and more than 100,000 visitors per day on weekends. „We are just starting to ramp up our CotaiJet operations and the real impact will be felt when we begin running multiple ferries both day and night,“ he said.