

Casino workers offered buyouts; Uncertain economy brings cutbacks

Full-time employees at Niagara's two casinos have less than two weeks to decide whether to take a buyout package or hold onto their jobs.

„We're offering our permanent full-time employees a financial compensation package," said Greg Medulun, a spokesman for Niagara Fallsview Casino Resort and Casino Niagara.

The casinos told employees last week of a „voluntary resignation package" and a program to shift workers' status to part time from full time. The changes were partly in response to requests from some employees and partly to be „realistic" about the upcoming season, Medulun said Friday.

The news was „disheartening" to Niagara Falls MPP Kim Craitor, who learned of the buyout offer Thursday night. One woman who works for the casinos told him she felt like she „had a gun to her head," Craitor said.

„I can't imagine being in that position. One lady on the phone was crying with me," Craitor said.

The Liberal MPP said he's „frustrated" because the government of Ontario owns the casinos, but doesn't have any say in its day-to-day operations.

Employees at the two casinos have until May 16 if they want to request a „voluntary resignation package," a memo from human resources vice-president Judy Trout states. The memo was dated April 25 and sent to all permanent full-time associates.

The casinos are offering three weeks' pay for every year an employee has worked for the casinos. Casino Niagara opened in

1996. Buyouts are capped at 26 weeks' pay, meaning someone with a little more than eight and a half years' experience would get the maximum offer, even though workers who started when Casino Niagara opened would have more than 11 years experience.

„As a company we're being realistic about the upcoming season,“ Medulun said.

Niagara's casinos serve a drive-in market, many of them from the United States. With gas prices discouraging travel by car, a drop in American tourists to Canada and increase in the number of Canadians cashing in on the high loonie by visiting the United States, the casinos face serious challenges this summer.

The casinos are also trying to change the mix of employees, which is approximately 65 per cent full time and 35 per cent part time, a situation that's „not perfect,“ Medulun said.

„The current mix doesn't provide us with an opportunity to operate a 24-7, 365-day business,“ he said.

The casinos now have 5,000 employees, but it's too soon to know how the buyout and full-time to part-time program will change that, Medulun said. He wouldn't say how many people the casinos would allow to take the packages, but said buyouts are „subject to operational needs,“ meaning department heads would turn down some requests if their departments became too thin.

Typically, voluntary resignation or early retirement packages are ways for employers to replace veteran workers at the high end of a pay-scale with newer people who start at the bottom.